

100 confessions

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/38717700) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/38717700>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	World Trigger (Anime & Manga)
Relationship:	Inukai Sumiharu/Tsuji Shinnosuke
Character:	Inukai Sumiharu , Tsuji Shinnosuke , Ninomiya Masataka
Additional Tags:	Romantic Comedy
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2022-05-01 Updated: 2022-06-11 Words: 19,416 Chapters: 3/8

100 confessions

by [Niyurika](#)

Summary

Receiving a sudden confession from the senpai whom Tsuji had only met a month ago, he soon got himself into a more complicated situation thanks to his impulsive response.

Was Inukai always this persistent or there was something behind his determination?

Notes

Happy birthday Inukai Sumiharu!!

Prologue

One day, in the cafeteria to discuss the strategy for the next rank war, the dark-blonde-haired senpai who had just been recruited by Ninomiya recently said: “I think I like you, Tsuji-chan. Let’s go out...”

Their eyes didn’t even meet because that senpai – Inukai Sumiharu – was gazing at the clear blue sky outside the windows.

Tsuji was completely stunned.

How had Inukai gotten the nerves to say such an important confession casually like that? His expression was so natural and he seemed to be in deep thought, not even glancing at Tsuji to check if the confession had reached its target. Was this the power of the communication skills that Tsuji kept hearing about?

“No.”

Before Tsuji knew it, the curt answer had already left his mouth. The pair of teal eyes snapped towards him, widening a bit.

Why was Inukai even surprised? Tsuji really couldn’t fathom. Had he expected that such a half-hearted confession would go through? They’d only known each other for a month, where did Inukai get his confidence from to believe Tsuji would accept?

“I don’t like you in that way, Inukai-senpai.” Tsuji repeated in a more polite manner, “I’m sorry.”

Inukai stared at him for a few seconds before a huff left his nose, signaling a held-back chuckle. “Ah, I see.” Inukai said with his familiar cheerful smile, “What a shame then.”

And just like that, they returned to their strategy planning.

The out-of-the-blue confession vanished like it had never existed.

...

Tsuji had thought that had been the end of it until the next day.

“Hey Tsuji-chan,” Inukai called when they were doing their homework in the strategy room.

Tsuji stopped his hand and looked up. Waiting for him was the pair of teal eyes slightly arching in amusement and a soft smile. “Yes?” Tsuji lifted an eyebrow.

“What do I have to do to make you accept my confession?” asked Inukai with an unchanging expression.

Observing Inukai for a few more seconds, Tsuji wondered how the mind of his older teammate worked. How could he ask that question without batting an eye despite just having been rejected yesterday? Didn’t he feel dejected or awkward?

Well... Considering Inukai’s personality, that was highly possible. Although they’d only met last month, Tsuji could tell about few facts about his senpai. And embarrassment didn’t seem to exist in Inukai’s book.

“Didn’t I tell you that I don’t like you in that way?” Tsuji questioned, deciding to stop pondering on Inukai’s inexplicable actions.

“But I like Tsuji-chan.” Inukai said, his smile shrinking a tiny bit, almost unnoticeable.

“I can’t suddenly change how I feel about you.” Tsuji said exasperatedly.

“I never asked you to.” Inukai shook his head, “I’m just asking what I can do to change your mind.”

Tsuji blinked. He had never thought about this. What would change his feelings for Inukai? Tsuji couldn’t think of anything or even imagine seeing Inukai in a different light. He did like Inukai, but that was the admiration for a teammate who had excellent assessment of a battle and could coordinate with Tsuji well after only a few practice matches. It wasn’t a romantic feeling. Although he hadn’t fallen in love before, he believed he wouldn’t be wrong about this.

“I won’t change my mind.” was Tsuji’s final answer.

“Oh come on,” Inukai whined, “Give your senpai a chance, will you?”

“But…” Tsuji hesitated, finding it hard to deny rudely in front of the pair of puppy eyes.

“Please, Tsuji-chan.” Inukai appealed, gazing at his kouhai expectantly.

How could anyone say no to this expression? Communication power was fearsome.

“Okay…” Tsuji gave in, letting out a sigh.

“Yay! Tsuji-chan is the best.” Inukai exclaimed, a smile blooming on his face, as bright as the summer sun.

Feeling defeated somehow, Tsuji continued, “I might change how I feel about Inukai-senpai if you confess to me one hundred times.”

“Huh?” Inukai blurted out, seemingly taken aback by the condition.

“Do you want me to repeat?” Tsuji asked, tilting his head slightly to the side.

“Yes please.” Inukai nodded immediately.

“If Inukai-senpai confesses to me one hundred times, I will re-consider my feeling for you.” Tsuji repeated, spelling out each word clearly.

Inukai blinked once, then a few more times, before confirming: “One hundred times?”

Tsuji nodded.

Silence reigned in the room as they stared at each other without saying anything.

And then, Inukai regained his lost smile. “Sure,” he said.

1st – 20th confession

Chapter Notes

I posted both the prologue and chapter 1 in the same day because the first one is quite short XD.

Hope you will enjoy :>.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tsuji never expected Inukai to accept his ridiculous condition. It was said on an impulse because the childish part of him couldn't stand to be on the losing side that got pushed around. He was fully prepared to receive a retort for saying something so unreasonable, yet his senpai just agreed. With a smile, no less.

And before Tsuji could say that he was just joking, Inukai grabbed his hands. "I like you, Tsuji-chan." he said affectionately, "Will you go out with me?"

Surprised for a second, then Tsuji frowned. "No, I won't." he answered simply.

"Ah, first rejection." Inukai said in a whiny voice but his smile didn't falter, as if he had already guessed the answer before it happened, "Ninety nine more confessions to go."

"Huh?" Tsuji blurted out, "Ninety nine?"

Inukai gave a nod then tilted his head, "One hundred minus one is equal to ninety nine, right?"

"This is your second confession already, senpai." Tsuji pointed out. *And second rejection too.* But he swallowed the latter part. There was no need to rub salt into a wound.

"The one in the cafeteria doesn't count," Inukai shook his head, "because that happened before you stated your condition."

"It's fine, I will let you count it too." Tsuji shrugged. One time wasn't many anyway.

However, Inukai still stubbornly refused, "Let's not include that time."

"Okay, up to you." Tsuji dropped the matter. If Inukai was confident in his persistence to the point of declining an advantage, Tsuji wouldn't stop him.

...

A few days later, Tsuji found the second confession written on a small paper placed in the middle of the manga Inukai lent him during their break time at school.

'Let's date, Tsuji-chan.' was all it said.

Tsuji silently folded the paper and returned it to Inukai sitting across the table.

"Is this a yes?"

“It’s a no, Inukai-senpai.”

...

The third and fourth confessions came on the same day. One was written neatly on the side of a grape juice box Inukai had tossed to Tsuji when they met by chance at the school gate, and the other arrived soon after when Inukai came to Tsuji’s class to pick him up for lunch.

“Did you see my message, Tsuji-chan?” asked Inukai quietly as they strolled down the corridor. Tsuji lifted an eyebrow questioningly. “Ah, I figured.” Inukai chuckled, “Never mind that, I’ll just ask you directly-”

“No.” Tsuji said simply, earning a pout from his older teammate.

“I haven’t even asked and you’ve already denied me.” Inukai puffed his cheeks.

“That’s the answer for your message on the juice box.” Tsuji clarified.

“Eh?” Inukai seemed surprised, “You noticed it?”

“Grape juice isn’t exactly my favorite so I observed the box before drinking.”

The pair of teal eyes widened a bit, but Inukai didn’t continue with that topic. “What drink does Tsuji-chan usually pick?” he asked instead.

“Something a bit richer and sweeter.” Tsuji answered after a brief moment of consideration.

“You mean milk?” prompted Inukai.

Was it that obvious? Tsuji wondered, but he just nodded.

And the laugh he had expected really came. It had always been like this. That was why Tsuji didn’t openly share his favorite food.

“Tsuji-chan is cute.”

“Because I like sweet stuff?”

“No, because you’re honest.”

That was unexpected. Tsuji had thought Inukai was laughing at him like his friends upon learning of his sweet tooth.

“I’ll buy you milk next time.” Inukai promised, beaming cheerfully.

“You don’t have to.” Tsuji denied, inadvertently averting his eyes away from that smile.

“Aw, what’s that? Are you embarrassed?” Inukai obviously caught that action, “Does Tsuji-chan finally have feelings for me?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Ouch, instant rejection.”

...

The fifth confession was wordless.

In the five minute break of P.E. class, Tsuji let his eyes wander the school building and coincidentally found Inukai at one of the windows. Their distance was great so Inukai didn't seem to notice him at first but when their eyes met, the older teammate immediately waved at him.

Then Inukai raised both of his arms and curved them to touch his head, forming a heart.

Tsuji made an X with his arms and turned away.

"Isn't that Inukai-senpai of class 11-D?" a classmate asked curiously.

"You know him?" Tsuji lifted an eyebrow, slightly taken aback by the sudden question.

"I don't know him in person, but the girls keep talking about him so I can't help remembering." That classmate huffed, "Well, can't deny he has a nice look."

No wonder Tsuji never heard anything about Inukai at school. Girls' talks were completely out of his grasp.

"How are you acquainted with him?" the classmate asked, looking thoughtful, "He doesn't seem like someone you would normally befriend with."

"We're in the same squad in the Border."

"Hah, figured."

...

"Why don't you like me back, Tsuji-chan?"

In the midst of a hazy dream, Tsuji heard the question. His eyes snapped open and Tsuji realized that wasn't a dream. In front of him, across the table in the school library was Inukai with a gentle gaze and a soft smile like he was looking at something he adored with all his heart.

Ah... so Inukai wasn't joking when he said he liked Tsuji.

However...

"I like you, just not in that way, Inukai-senpai." said Tsuji as he stared straight into the pair of teal eyes.

"I know." Inukai just smiled.

...

The seventh confession came in the form of a letter left in Tsuji's shoe locker. There was no sender, only the receiver's name on the front, which earned Tsuji a day full of teasing from his classmates.

No one could guess whom that was from, except for Tsuji, because he was too familiar with this handwriting. Therefore, in the afternoon, before the defense mission, he stuffed the letter along with his reply into Inukai's locker in the strategy room.

"Tsuji-chan is so blunt." was Inukai's whine as soon as he opened his locker.

...

The next day, Inukai had a good laugh at lunch when Tsuji complained that his letter got him into all kinds of troubles. For a moment, Tsuji wanted to knuckle his senpai's head for revenge but he had better control than that.

As an apology, Inukai bought a loaf of melon bread for Tsuji.

"You've been staring at it for a while, don't you like it?" Inukai asked concernedly, "I took into account your preference for sweet drinks, but maybe you like to eat something more savory?"

"No, I like it." Tsuji said as he tore the plastic wrapper after making sure there was no hidden message on it. Then he took a big bite. "Can you not stare at me while I'm eating?" he asked politely after swallowing.

"But Tsuji-chan is so cute, I can't help it." Inukai reasoned, bonus with his usual smile.

"Because I'm honest?" Tsuji lifted an eyebrow.

"No, because I like Tsuji-chan."

It was that sunshine smile again, and Tsuji focused on his bread, pretending he didn't see it.

"Silence means you accept-"

"No, I don't."

...

"Tsuji-chan. I like you."

"Please focus on the battle or you will get shot, Inukai-senpai."

"It's fine, it's fine."

And Inukai was really shot later, but Tsuji shielded his vital part in time to save him from bailing out right there and then.

Still, Tsuji couldn't save his senpai from a full lecture from Ninomiya although they emerged victorious in the end. Inukai deserved it though, for messing around with the inter-com.

"Listen to Tsuji when he tells you to concentrate." said Ninomiya with a frown, "Tsuji is more experienced than you in a battle."

"I always listen to him-"

"No, you don't, Inukai-senpai." Tsuji supplied helpfully, earning a smile from the dark-blond-haired teammate that clearly said *'Please shut up, thank you'*.

...

A week had passed since the ninth confession but there was no sign of Inukai approaching Tsuji for the tenth. Every time they met, their conversations only revolved around the Border, either about trigger settings, battle tactics or defense missions.

Tsuji wondered if the mistake last time got to Inukai somehow. It was surprising, considering how Inukai always seemed carefree. He even said that he joined the Border for fun. That was why Tsuji was wondering why someone as serious as Ninomiya had recruited Inukai.

But maybe he was wrong.

“Inukai-sen-” Tsuji halted.

On the way back from the vending machine behind the school building, Tsuji caught sight of his older teammate but as soon as he called out, his eyes noticed the girl walking in front of Inukai. Swallowing back the voice that almost spilled out, Tsuji turned on his heels.

Yet, a few moments later, Tsuji found himself hiding behind a wall at the back yard close to where Inukai and the girl stopped.

Okay, he wasn't planning to eavesdrop, because apparently, at this distance, he couldn't hear anything from those two. He was only following Inukai because he was a bit concerned about his teammate's wellbeing.

As Tsuji was thinking, a piercing slap resounded, pulling his shoulders up to his ears. He immediately peeked out from the wall but pulled back twice as fast when the girl rushed past his position. Luckily, he wasn't spotted.

Waiting until the girl was entirely out of sight, Tsuji piped out again. Inukai was still standing at the same spot with a hand holding his cheek loosely.

Should he approach and ask if Inukai was okay? No, that would definitely reveal that he had followed Inukai. But he didn't listen in to anything so it was like he had just passed by, wasn't it? Yes, he should just act like he found Inukai purely by chance.

Having made up his mind, Tsuji left the corner and called out to his senpai.

Inukai jumped where he stood and hastily spun around, giving Tsuji a startled look. “Tsu-Tsuji-chan!” he stuttered, “What are you doing here?”

“I saw you standing here alone so...” Tsuji trailed off, noticing how robotic his voice sounded. Mentally facepalming, Tsuji wished he had practiced more before stepping out.

“I see.” Inukai nodded understandingly, the usual smile stretching on his lips, “I suppose you heard it?”

Tsuji remained quiet, wondering if he should be honest or go along with the version of the event that Inukai was thinking about.

It seemed that Inukai took Tsuji's silence as a question, so he removed his hand from his cheek, exposing a red and slightly swollen mark. “This, I mean.” he pointed at the hand-shaped mark, still smiling as if it was someone else's matter.

Because Tsuji didn't know how to explain his action of following Inukai, he decided to just nod and pretend that he had been drawn here by the slapping sound.

“Ah, how embarrassing.” Inukai exclaimed, letting out a sigh, “Letting Tsuji-chan see me in such an uncool state.”

“I've seen several of your uncool moments in battles already.” said Tsuji flatly.

“Ouch.” Inukai yelled, jokingly hugging his chest as if Tsuji's statement had pierced him mercilessly.

To be honest, the current Inukai was pretty cool in Tsuji's eyes. The fact that he could laugh his shameful moment off like nothing was impressive. However, Tsuji would never tell Inukai this, or the older teammate would never let him live this down.

"Why did she slap you, Inukai-senpai?" Tsuji asked when Inukai moved his hand to his cheek again.

"Ah, she wanted to get back together, but I told her I wanted to focus on the Border for now." Inukai answered casually, still wearing his carefree expression, "So she was upset and said that I'd forgotten her so easily and slapped me."

"That's..." Tsuji pressed his lips together, not knowing what to say but also feeling it wasn't right to keep staying silent.

"Hm?" Inukai tilted his head to the side, gesturing for Tsuji to continue but the younger teammate couldn't, so he proceeded with the story, "I wanted to tell her that I had Tsuji-chan now, but considering her violent nature, I didn't."

Thankfully, Inukai hadn't done that. Tsuji really couldn't imagine how he would survive a yelling – or worse, a slap – from a girl he had never met. If that happened, he would never ever get over his weakness.

"Wait, you said 'get back together' -"

"Yes, she's my ex." Inukai said nonchalantly, "We broke up last year."

"You had a girlfriend before?" asked Tsuji, slightly taken aback for some reason.

"Yes. What's about it?" Inukai confirmed, lifting an eyebrow.

"Then why do you like boys now?"

"Huh?" Inukai's eyes widened a bit before a frown formed on his forehead, "No, I don't."

Tsuji was clearly confused now.

Fortunately, Inukai continued without waiting for a response from the younger teammate, "I don't like boys in general; I only like Tsuji-chan." He lifted a finger, physically pointing out the problem in Tsuji's sentence.

"But..." Too many questions circled in Tsuji's head, leaving him unable to talk. He had thought Inukai was attracted to boys so he was drawn to Tsuji, who was the closest to him in the squad, but it wasn't the case. Inukai only liked Tsuji, *specifically*, despite his history of dating girls.

After several failed tries, Tsuji gave up with a long sigh. He didn't have any experience about this so even if he spent more time pondering, there wouldn't be any result.

"Do my feelings finally reach Tsuji-chan?" Inukai grinned, tilting his head to the side cutely.

Tsuji dodged his look. "I still don't see Inukai-senpai like that." he mumbled, hating the weakness in his own voice.

However, Inukai didn't push him. "I know," Inukai said, giggling, "I'll wait."

...

After the incident in the backyard, Inukai returned to his confessing agenda.

When Tsuji was doing his homework in the strategy room while waiting for Ninomiya to come back from a captain meeting, the door slid open and Inukai rushed in.

“The weather is nice today. Let’s go out, Tsuji-chan!” Inukai exclaimed energetically.

“What do you mean by going out?” Tsuji lifted his gaze from the notebook and gave the older teammate an unamused look, “Going outside or dating?”

Inukai held his chin, humming. “Both,” was his final answer.

“No, and no.” Tsuji said flatly.

“Bummer.”

...

“What the hell is this, Inukai?!”

Tsuji’s heart flew straight out of his chest at Ninomiya’s angry roar. Inukai hastily left his seat and bolted to the Operator room, not forgetting to send Tsuji a quick look as if blaming him for something.

After around twenty minutes, Inukai returned to the main room, completely worn-out.

“Did you leave the memo to spite me, Tsuji-chan?” Inukai asked tiredly as he went back to his seat.

“Memo?” Tsuji tilted his head to the side confusedly.

“My confession to you.” Inukai went straight to the point, “I wrote it on a memo and stuck it in my report.”

“You did?!” Tsuji gasped, covering his mouth with a hand.

Inukai sent Tsuji a doubtful look as if telling him to stop pretending, but after a few seconds, he seemed to realize what was going on. “Don’t tell me you didn’t see it.” Inukai mumbled unbelievably.

Tsuji shook his head slowly.

“How?” Inukai opened a hand, “I stuck it on the second page; you should’ve seen it right away when you proofread my report.”

Ah. Now Tsuji knew why. “I didn’t proofread your report.” he said, earning an incredulous look from his older teammate.

“Eh?” Inukai was taken aback, “You’ve always proofread my reports before submitting to Ninomiya-san. Are you too busy today?”

“No, I decided to stop doing so.” Tsuji said.

“Why?”

Because senpai is more serious about the Border’s work than I thought. Obviously, Tsuji couldn’t say that, so he said something different: “You’re experienced enough to stop making mistakes in a

report, so I figured I could skip a step.”

“I see.” Inukai gave a few nods, “But please inform me of your decision next time.” He let out a sigh before smiling exasperatedly, “It was really awkward when Ninomiya-san thought I confessed to him.”

“What did you write in the memo?” asked Tsuji.

“I like you. Please go out with me.”

“You didn’t include my name.”

“That’s why.” Inukai shrugged.

Tsuji almost slipped a chuckle.

“Go out with me as compensation.” Inukai requested.

“Sorry,” Tsuji shook his head, “But I’ll buy you lunch tomorrow.”

...

“Yakisoba bread, nice!” Inukai flashed a thumbs-up at Tsuji, “Not exactly my favorite but almost.”

“I’m sorry, I wanted to buy a hotdog but it ran out.” Tsuji sighed.

Inukai blinked, then he let out a soft ‘huh’.

“Did I say something wrong?” Tsuji frowned slightly.

“No, but I’m surprised.” Inukai shook his head, “I didn’t expect Tsuji-chan to know my favorite food.”

“It’s hard not to know when you eat hotdogs every day.” Tsuji pointed out.

“What? No way.” Inukai protested, “I only buy hotdogs when we have a defense mission in the afternoon.”

“Let me correct it then.” Tsuji agreed, “It’s hard not to know when Inukai-senpai eats hotdogs every time we meet at the Border.”

“No way that’s true...” Inukai said weakly.

“Yes way, senpai.” Tsuji couldn’t stop a smug smile sneaking on his lips.

“No, I didn’t eat that many hotdogs...”

“Yes, you did.”

“No...”

“Yes.”

“Please go out with me.”

“No.”

...

Exams were near. Tsuji was swamped with homework so he often brought it to the Border every time they had a defense mission to make good use of any free time he had. Moreover, if he was stuck somewhere, he could always ask Ninomiya for advice since the captain had an excellent academic performance.

“That part is wrong, Tsuji-chan.”

Startled, Tsuji snapped his head up. Across the table, Inukai was pointing his finger at a sentence in Tsuji’s notebook. Following his senpai’s instruction, he reread the mentioned part and realized he was indeed wrong.

“Thanks, Inukai-senpai.” He erased the wrong answer and corrected it.

“The answer you’re writing is wrong too.” said Inukai.

“Huh?” Tsuji halted his hand, rereading the question once again but unfortunately unable to identify his mistake.

“You’re using the wrong tense.” Inukai explained, “It should be present perfect, not past tense.”

“Ah, you’re right.” Tsuji agreed immediately, his clouded brain cleared up in an instant.

Then they fell back into silence with Tsuji continuing with his homework and Inukai with his manga.

“*Will you be my lover?*”

It was undoubtedly Inukai’s voice but sounded completely different in perfect English. That was why Tsuji only lifted his head up in bewilderment without knowing what to answer. His tone was gentle and soft like the question Inukai had whispered in the library, but the seriousness in it froze even time itself.

“What’s your answer, Tsuji-chan?” Changing back to Japanese, Inukai tilted his head slightly with his familiar smile. The atmosphere in the room returned to normal at once.

However, it took Tsuji almost a minute to stammer: “*N-No, I’m s-sorry.*” in shaky English.

...

“Tsuji-chan, milk or hot cocoa?” Inukai’s voice rang from the kitchenette.

“Please give me hot cocoa, thank you.” Tsuji answered without a second of hesitation.

“Green tea for me and Hatohara-senpai, thanks Inukai-senpai.” Hiyami’s voice chimed before Inukai could ask.

Ninomiya’s coffee had already been done and delivered to the Operator room for him a few moments ago.

It was what they usually called ‘relax time’ after a rank war’s meeting concluded. Normally, Ninomiya would also join them for idle chats here for a short time before everyone was dismissed. However, the captain was busy with his university report today so there were only four people in the main room.

They took turns making drinks during these moments, and Hatohara's always tasted the best. Runner-up was Hiyami's. Inukai was good at a few kinds like coffee and cocoa – milk wasn't counted because the process only included heating it up. And finally, Tsuji's products were at an acceptable level with a lot of space to improve – he was better than Inukai at making milk tea though. Of course, Ninomiya had his turn before, but all four subordinates agreed to just let him rest after tasting his drinks once.

"This isn't my cup." Tsuji said as soon as Inukai placed the cup of hot cocoa on the table in front of him.

"I accidentally dropped your cup yesterday so I bought a new one." Inukai said apologetically, "But I made sure to choose an identical one. How can you tell?"

"I just know it." Tsuji said coolly. His old cup had a chip on the handle but barely visible so no one actually noticed it aside from him. He would keep this little secret though, so that the next time Inukai made the same mistake, he wouldn't try to cover it up.

After finishing their tea, Hatohara and Hiyami bid their goodbyes. Inukai told them to leave the cups for him to wash together with Ninomiya's and his own later.

Tsuji was excluded for some reason but he didn't mind...

... until he washed his new cup.

At the bottom of the cup, a heart emerged after the cocoa layer was wiped away. Under the heart was a short message '*Love you*' written in English.

"Do you like your new cup?" Inukai peeked in from behind.

Startled, Tsuji slipped his hands and the cup landed in the sink with a crash. Hastily picking the cup up, he examined it closely and tried pouring tap water into it to check for cracks. Fortunately, no damage was found.

"Don't spook me like that, senpai." Tsuji complained.

"Sorry, I thought you knew I was approaching." Inukai scratched the back of his head.

"I'm not in my trion body." said Tsuji exasperatedly.

"Sorry, sorry."

Huffing, Tsuji wiped the cup with a towel and put it in the cupboard. Then he turned around, facing Inukai. "About your question, I don't like the decoration." said Tsuji bluntly, "But I appreciate the gift."

"That's good enough." Inukai shrugged with a contented smile.

...

Rainy season ended a few weeks ago, but because of the weather forecast this morning, Tsuji was forced to bring an umbrella.

Turns out the weather forecast was correct. Tsuji made a mental note to thank his mother later for her persistence.

"Tsuji-chan, wait a minute!"

As soon as Tsuji opened his umbrella, Inukai's voice sounded from behind. He turned around, meeting the pair of teal eyes, and gave a nod before his senpai could ask the question.

They walked side by side, shoulders touching, yet Inukai's other shoulder still got wet because the umbrella wasn't broad enough – it was for one person after all. Tsuji wanted to move the umbrella towards Inukai more but the older teammate insisted that Tsuji should stay dry because he was the owner.

The sound of the rain made conversing somewhat difficult so they didn't talk much. Tsuji was used to a silent walk anyway. However, a quiet Inukai was actually rare, so he snuck a glance at his senpai. Inukai was looking straight ahead, his teal eyes serene like a pond in a forest reflecting the far blue sky obstructed by layers of branches and leaves. Those pink lips that usually formed a smile slightly pressed together, giving Inukai a serious and somewhat distant look.

“Hey, Tsuji-chan.” Inukai suddenly spoke up, voice loud enough not to be drowned out by the rain.

Tsuji lifted an eyebrow out of habit but because Inukai wasn't looking at him, he answered out loud: “Yes?”

“Is it close to your house yet?”

“Turn right at the crossroad ahead and walk for ten more minutes, we will arrive at my house.” Tsuji said then realization dawned on him that he hadn't asked where Inukai's house was but just followed his own route, “Is Inukai-senpai's house in this direction too?”

“I'll turn left at the crossroad.”

Just a few more steps then they would part ways.

Tsuji slowed down when Inukai did the same. However, the moment to say goodbye still arrived.

“Thanks for lending me the umbrella.” Inukai said, flashing his familiar sunshine smile, “It felt like we were on a date for a while.”

“No-”

“No, we weren't, right?” Inukai grinned, taking a step back, out of the umbrella area and into the pouring rain, “I know, Tsuji-chan, but thanks for indulging my imagination for a short time. Let's date for real one day.”

Before Tsuji could deny that sixteenth confession, Inukai had already turned around and ran through the rain.

...

“Idiots really don't catch cold, do they?” asked Tsuji as he chewed the melon bread.

“I'll pretend I didn't hear that.” Inukai sent him a pointed look.

Inukai had run home in a downpour but he was completely fine the next day, even buying Tsuji the bread as a thank you for escorting him halfway home. On the other hand, Tsuji had a slight cough just because he had spoken a bit too loudly in the rain yesterday.

“Is your house close to that crossroad?” Tsuji speculated.

“Ten minutes of walking distance.”

Similar to Tsuji's house, just in the opposite direction.

"Maybe my feelings for Tsuji-chan were warm enough to protect me from the cold." Inukai said with an impish smile, "If only you had some feeling for me, you wouldn't be coughing now."

Tsuji sent his senpai an unamused look, earning a series of laughter.

"Jokes aside, I bought some ginger candies, eat it after you finish your meal." Inukai held a hand towards Tsuji with some yellow candies in the middle of his palm.

Tsuji took all of those and shoved them into his blazer's pocket. "Thank you." he whispered.

"No need to be thankful, just hurry up and fall for me." Inukai grinned.

"I'll thank you instead." Tsuji deadpanned.

"So cold." Inukai pouted, "That's why you're coughing."

"I'm going back to my class."

"Wait! I'm joking!"

...

The defense mission ended later than usual so Inukai accompanied Tsuji to go home while Ninomiya escorted Hatozaki. Hiyami was picked up by her father.

"Wow, beautiful stars." Inukai commented with an impressed expression as he gazed at the night sky.

Tsuji looked up and found the same sight. Because Mikado had faced a large-scale invasion from the Neighbors two years ago, people tended to build small houses rather than high ones. Therefore, the view of the sky was often unobstructed. The night sky stretched out endlessly, decorated by thousands of glittering stars like a river made of light flowing under a single crescent moon.

"The moon is also beautiful." Tsuji added.

Inukai immediately snapped his head towards Tsuji. "I love you too." he grinned.

"Huh?" Tsuji blurted out confusedly.

"Isn't Tsuji-chan good at Japanese literature?" Inukai tilted his head slightly to the side, "That's surprising."

Then it dawned on Tsuji. "So that's why you purposely left out the moon." he said, giving his older teammate a narrow look.

"Whatever did I do?" Inukai smiled ever so innocently.

"This is why I don't love Inukai-senpai." Tsuji mumbled but made sure it was loud enough to reach the target.

"That's mean, Tsuji-chan."

...

It had been more than twenty minutes since Tsuji had arrived at the strategy room and Inukai was still fumbling with something in his hands.

At first, Tsuji hadn't paid attention, thinking he shouldn't mind other people's businesses. However, after ten minutes, he had become slightly curious. And after ten more minutes, he was now officially staring at Inukai.

The older teammate had a focused expression with his eyebrows furrowed and his eyes locked on the object that his hands had been twisting around for who knew how long. Even in a battle, Tsuji barely had chances to witness such seriousness from Inukai. He wondered what that thing was.

And because Inukai didn't seem to notice the younger teammate's presence any time soon, Tsuji decided to speak up: "What are you doing, Inukai-senpai?"

Inukai snapped his head up, looking surprised. "Ah, good afternoon, Tsuji-chan." he greeted cheerfully, "Have you just arrived?"

"I've *only* been sitting beside you for twenty minutes." Tsuji said, taken aback by his own sarcastic tone.

"Eh? Really?" Inukai asked incredulously.

Tsuji simply nodded. "What are you doing?" he repeated the question when Inukai held his chin thoughtfully.

"Ah, I've been trying to solve this." Inukai answered, holding out a rubik's cube with none of the sides completed. Catching Tsuji's questioning look, Inukai continued, "I found it in my desk drawer last night, probably from my primary school days, so I thought maybe I could solve it now – as a high school student – but I was wrong." He scratched the back of his head with a sheepish smile.

"May I try?" Tsuji opened a palm.

"Sure." Inukai placed the rubik's cube into the younger teammate's hand without hesitation.

It only took Tsuji less than five minutes to solve it, which was actually slow compared to when he had been in middle school. However, before he handed it back to Inukai, something on the white side caught his attention: 'Tsuji' was written in black ink. Raising an eyebrow in confusion, he turned the rubik's cube around and soon found the full message:

'I like you, Tsuji-chan.'

He should have known. A witty person like Inukai couldn't be in trouble with a child's game like this.

Letting out a sigh, Tsuji returned the rubik's cube to Inukai, who was smiling ever so innocently. "Do you want my answer?" he asked.

"No, you just have to nod."

And Tsuji firmly shook his head.

...

"Aren't you tired of this yet?" was Tsuji's response to the twentieth confession from his dark-

blonde-haired senpai.

They were on the rooftop of the school building, enjoying their lunch in silence, and Inukai decided to break that tranquility with one of his confessions. A denial was on the tip of Tsuji's tongue but when he lifted his gaze, the familiar sight stupefied him for a moment.

Inukai wasn't looking at him but the blue sky beyond the fences, or even beyond the vicinity of Mikado. The gaze he was having was as gentle as when he looked at Tsuji in the library – if not more – yet there was a wistful longing that Tsuji had never seen on Inukai's expression before, as if he was gazing at something that would never belong to him.

And before Tsuji knew it, the question had already left his mouth.

Inukai turned to the younger teammate, the familiar smile blooming on his lips as if his prior expression had never existed. "Is Tsuji-chan tired of listening to my confessions already?" he asked playfully, "It's only the twentieth, isn't it?"

"No, I'm fine." Tsuji shook his head, "But doesn't it bother Inukai-senpai to keep getting rejected?" Then realizing his statement was too insensitive, he hastily added: "I mean... Is it really worth all your efforts?"

Inukai crossed his arms, giving a long hum. "You're wondering why I don't look troubled by your rejections?" he asked.

"No, I-" Tsuji quickly denied but stopped midway. He did have questions about that. Every time he declined Inukai's confession, the older teammate always smiled carefree like nothing had gone wrong. "... I mean... yes." he reluctantly admitted.

"Hmm," Inukai hummed, looking thoughtful, "I thought that if I showed my disappointment, it might bother Tsuji-chan; but now that I think about it, does my untroubled attitude make my confessions seem insincere?"

"No, I'm certain Inukai-senpai is sincere in all of your confessions." Tsuji protested immediately. Then seeing Inukai's startled expression, he averted his eyes to the side, bringing a hand up to cover his mouth. "Or... I feel so, at least." he added embarrassedly.

A few seconds of silence passed by before Inukai let out a few giggles. "I'm glad my feelings reached Tsuji-chan." he said, regaining Tsuji's attention. "You know, your rejections did sting, but I've been prepared for them since the start." A radiant smile emerged on Inukai's lips, "It's never easy to change how people feel about you, but for Tsuji-chan, I'm willing to exert all my efforts."

Tsuji's breath was taken away.

Ah... this person really loves me a lot, doesn't he? was the thought that crossed his mind and Tsuji was overcome by an inexplicable embarrassment.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading <3.

I've been harboring this idea for a long time and planned to post this only when I complete the fic, but work piled up on me and Inukai's birthday arrived without me

having anything else prepared so I decided to post this.

Hope the constantly changing situations for all the confessions wouldn't make you confused ^^".

And again, this fic is dedicated to Inukai. Happy birthday, Inukai Sumiharu <3.

21st – 40th confession

Chapter Notes

I'm back after more than a month. Sorry for the long wait ^^".

Today is my birthday so this is also a birthday gift for myself XD.

Hope you enjoy :D.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

As soon as the door slid open, a series of party poppers went off. Tsuji jumped backwards out of reflex, successfully dodging all the confetti.

“Eh? Tsuji-kun evaded it.” Hiyami sounded regretful.

“Told you he has an Attacker’s reflex.” Inukai’s voice followed.

As Tsuji was listening to the conversations, another popper went off and the confetti hit him right in the face.

“Nice one, Hatohara-chan.”

Hatohara giggled at Inukai’s compliment while Tsuji was trying to get the colorful papers off his head. “What’s going on?” he asked, trying not to sound annoyed.

Hatohara, Hiyami and Inukai shared a look before all three of them made a short ‘ah’.

“We were too focused on trying to hit Tsuji-kun, we forgot to say it.” Hiyami was the first to speak up.

“I said it but maybe my voice was too low...” Hatohara whispered, fidgeting with her hands.

“Let’s say it again together then.” Inukai suggested joyfully.

“What-”

“Happy birthday!”

The three different voices cheered in unison, interrupting Tsuji’s question. Then all three teammates raised their party poppers again but soon remembered those had already been used so they quickly lowered their hands.

“Come in, Tsuji-chan. Ninomiya-san is waiting.” Inukai rushed, grabbing Tsuji’s lower arm and pulling him inside.

Just as said, Ninomiya was sitting at the table where they usually held their meeting, but not in his normal position.

“That’s my seat...” Tsuji mumbled ever so softly to his older teammate.

“No,” Inukai shook his head and swiftly pulled Tsuji towards the seat in front of the monitor, “You will be sitting here today, main character.”

Then Inukai released Tsuji’s hand and went to the chair beside Ninomiya. Hiyami and Hatohara also got into their normal positions.

Taking a quick glance at the empty chair at the host position, Tsuji then scanned over his teammates. Ninomiya still wore his expressionless face, in total contrast to Inukai’s sunshine smile. On the other side of the table, Hiyami seemed calmed, almost mirroring the captain’s expression except for the anticipation in her sapphire eyes. Hatohara was giving Tsuji a tender look and a soft smile as if she was watching a younger brother.

“What are you waiting for?” Ninomiya lifted an eyebrow, “Take a seat, Tsuji.”

Tsuji immediately obeyed without a second of hesitation.

On the table was a classic white cake, decorated with strawberries. The phrase ‘Happy birthday, Tsuji Shinnosuke’ was written beautifully in red cream. Around the cake were a dish containing fried chicken, a pizza, a few bags of chips and a bowl of candies.

Hatohara planted fifteen candles on the cake then Ninomiya lit them one by one.

“Make a wish, Tsuji-chan.” Inukai reminded Tsuji when he remained still like an idiot because he still couldn’t believe Ninomiya actually lit up his birthday candles. Not that he thought Ninomiya was heartless or something, but the sight of the captain participating in a casual party was still surreal.

Tsuji clumsily clasped his hands together and closed his eyes but there was nothing in his mind. However, if he brainstormed too long, the candles would burn out and make everyone worry so Tsuji decided to go with a basic wish.

Please let the Ninomiya squad stay together for as long as possible.

Then Tsuji opened his eyes and blew off the candles.

A birthday song was started by Inukai, who was soon accompanied by Hiyami and Hatohara. Ninomiya didn’t join in until Inukai literally begged him with his puppy eyes. Tsuji almost couldn’t hold in the laugh bubbling up from his stomach as soon as the captain’s monotone chimed in. However, the glare from Inukai that clearly said ‘*Don’t you dare laugh*’ helped Tsuji swallow his laughter.

The party ended at around eight p.m. and Tsuji went home with his gifts. All of the presents contain dinosaur-related items – probably because Tsuji had a few dinosaur models displayed in the Operator’s room. His teammates were all perceptive and considerate, weren’t they?

As expected, beside a stuffed Stegosaurus and a birthday card, there was another card in Inukai’s gift box carrying his love confession.

Tsuji took out his phone and dialed his senpai’s number.

“Found my message?” Inukai sounded from the other side of the line.

“That’s why I’m calling you.” Tsuji said, earning a chuckle.

“You could’ve texted me the answer, you know.”

“That’s not a proper way to respond to a confession.”

“How serious.” Inukai laughed, “Are you going to accept my confession this time?”

Tsuji could imagine his older teammate’s current expression without having to think twice. Inukai was probably having an amusing smile on his lips while his teal eyes were arching as he had anticipated the obvious answer.

“No, I’m sorry.” So Tsuji gave him that answer, and expected the familiar response.

“I know.” with a giggle.

...

Next day, Inukai approached Tsuji after he finished his lunch and led him to the rooftop with fewer students around.

“Here, for Tsuji-chan.” Inukai said as he held out a brown paper box.

“What is it?” Tsuji questioned.

“My love for y- Wait, I’m joking, don’t refuse it.” Inukai said exasperatedly when Tsuji lifted his hand, about to decline.

Letting out a sigh, Tsuji received the box. The weight surprised him instantly.

This...

He hastily opened the lid. And just as he had guessed, a cream puff was waiting inside.

“Do I get your favorite food correctly this time?” Inukai asked with a confident smile.

“H-How?” Tsuji stuttered, giving his senpai an incredulous look. He had never told anyone either in the Border or at school about his passion for cream puffs.

Inukai put a finger on his lips, smiling mysteriously. “It’s a secret.” he whispered then took a step backwards and put on his carefree smile, “Enjoy your dessert, Tsuji-chan.”

There were so many questions Tsuji wanted to ask but the lunch break was almost over and the cream puff was waving at him with its alluring aroma. So he dug in.

The crust and buttercream melt on his tongue upon the first bite. The vanilla scent filled his nose while the light sweet taste was spreading in his mouth and down his throat. It had been some time since the last time he had tasted cream puff outside of his house out of the fear of being teased by his peers, so somehow, this cream puff tasted a hundred times better than usual.

Smacking a hand to his mouth, Tsuji suddenly remembered where he was. However, when he looked up, there was only a stunned Inukai waiting for him. The pair of teal eyes locked on Tsuji as if hypnotized while Inukai’s lips slightly parted like he was in the middle of saying something but suddenly froze over.

“Inukai-senpai?” Tsuji called, somewhat concerned.

Inukai’s shoulders went up to his ears as he snapped back to reality. “Ah,” he blurted out, evading Tsuji’s look, “What is it, Tsuji-chan?”

“Are you okay?” Tsuji asked, taking a step forward. However, when he reached out, thinking of checking his senpai’s temperature, Inukai backed off, closely dodging his hand. “What-”

The school bell rang, interrupting Tsuji, and when the noises died down, Inukai’s familiar smile had already returned to his face.

“What is it, Tsuji-chan?” Inukai repeated the question, smiling brightly as he caught Tsuji’s outstretched arm by the wrist, “Do you finally have feelings for me?”

Pulling back immediately, Tsuji easily retrieved his hand because Inukai’s grip had no strength in it. “No, I don’t.” he mumbled under his breath but it seemed that Inukai fully got the message because the older teammate simply smiled and waved his hand.

...

Inukai wasn’t the best Gunner in Border. Tsuji had witnessed more skillful people in action. However, the sight of Inukai practicing shooting was always fascinating to Tsuji. His swift movement and precise aim had been astounding from the very first day they had met – which was probably one of the factors why Ninomiya had chosen Inukai – and only became more and more impressive over time.

That was why Tsuji always made sure not to miss any of his senpai’s practices although all he did was standing around and watching.

Today was one of those days.

However, it seemed that Inukai wasn’t in his best form because he seemed to miss his targets a few times.

“Is everything okay, Inukai-senpai?” Tsuji asked through the inter-com.

Inukai spun around, his smile apparent despite their long distance in the virtual space. “I’m fine,” he replied calmly but there was a teasing hint hidden, “But are you sure you don’t love me, Tsuji-chan?”

“No, I don’t.” Tsuji said instantly, “Please focus on your practice. You’ve been missing a lot today.”

“Missing?” Inukai laughed, “You really only have your eyes on me, don’t you?”

“Please stop joking-”

“I’m not joking.” Inukai interrupted, “Look beyond the targets, Tsuji-chan.”

Slightly annoyed when the older teammate goofed off during practice but Tsuji still did as told and found the answer.

A heart drawn by bullet holes on a house’s wall emerged when the shooting dummies collapsed entirely.

So that was why some of the shots went in weird directions. Why didn’t Tsuji think about this? Inukai’s accuracy would never allow such a thing.

When Tsuji looked back at his senpai, Inukai had already had a wide grin on his face.

“Please don’t joke around during practice.” Tsuji deadpanned, “And I don’t love you, Inukai-

senpai.”

“Aw, you don’t have to reject me twice.”

...

“Tsuji, isn’t Inukai-senpai waving at you?” a classmate informed Tsuji during his P.E. class.

Following the direction his friend was pointing at, Tsuji found the mentioned senpai at the windows on the floor of the second year. As soon as their eyes met, Inukai beamed brightly. Although their distance didn’t allow Tsuji to see many details, he could still make out Inukai’s radiant smile without much effort.

Then Inukai made some gesture that Tsuji barely had time to understand before throwing something into the air.

Letting out a surprised sound, Tsuji hastily rushed in Inukai’s direction but stopped midway when the older teammate signaled that he didn’t have to. And when he looked up, a paper airplane was gliding gracefully towards him. After some flips due to a breeze, the airplane landed on Tsuji’s head.

Reaching up and taking the airplane, Tsuji could easily guess the contents without even opening it. Therefore, he looked up, meeting Inukai’s gaze again and made an X with his arms.

The smile on Inukai’s lips never faded.

“What’s wrong, Tsuji?” The classmate finally caught up, “You ran off all of a sudden.”

“Nothing,” Tsuji shook his head, stuffing the paper airplane into his pants’ pocket.

“Are you close to Inukai-senpai? I saw him and you eating lunch together more often than not.”

“Not exactly.” Tsuji said thoughtfully, “But maybe we’re closer than before.”

“Because you two are in the same squad at the Border?”

Tsuji simply shrugged.

Because he likes me. There was no way he could say this.

...

Storming towards the squad’s strategy room, for once, Tsuji wished the door hadn’t been the automatic type so he could slam it open. However, it was in fact automatic, so all he did was stand there, agitatedly waiting for it to slide to the side.

“Good afternoon, Tsuji-cha-”

“Good evening, Inukai-senpai.” Tsuji interrupted, earning a surprised look from his older teammate.

Ignoring the masterful act, Tsuji walked straight to where Inukai was sitting and took out a piece of crumpled paper from his shirt’s pocket, slamming it on the table. Inukai jolted backwards a little.

“Can you inform me of the meeting time through official channels?” Tsuji asked, giving his senpai one of his sternest looks.

“You’re here twenty minutes before the meeting so my mission is accomplished, isn’t it?” Inukai said with a totally unapologetic smile.

“What if I didn’t read the letter in your airplane?” Tsuji frowned.

Despite having already denied the confession, Tsuji still unfolded the paper airplane he had received from Inukai during the P.E. class when he came back to his room at home. Aside from the expected confession which was simply ‘*Let’s go out, Tsuji-chan!*’ was another sentence below stating ‘*Meeting time: 7 p.m. today.*’

Tsuji had literally scrambled out of his room in his halfway-changed uniform, putting on his shoes in a hurry, and yelled a goodbye without having time to confirm if anyone in his family had heard him. Then after that was a race to the Border HQ in ten minutes or less.

“I would give you a call if you didn’t show up twenty minutes before the meeting time.” Inukai said calmly, “But I have a strong belief that the person I like would read all my confessions properly.” A confident smile bloomed on his lips, “I’m right, aren’t I?”

Not liking the way Inukai had seen through him effortlessly, Tsuji crossed his arms, “You’re just trying to get back at me for the scolding you got from Ninomiya-san because of the misdirected confession.”

“Am I that petty in Tsuji-chan’s eyes?” Inukai puffed his cheeks. Tsuji gave him a narrow look. “Okay, maybe a little.” Inukai averted his eyes to the side, sticking out the tip of his tongue.

“I knew it.” Tsuji huffed, getting into his seat beside Inukai, “Please grow up, *senpai*.”

“I’m plenty mature already.” Inukai protested.

“I wouldn’t deny your confessions if you were.”

“Oi, who is the childish one now?”

...

The twenty sixth confession came so casually that Tsuji was almost caught off-guard.

It was the last rank war match of the season, and Tsuji cut open a building to rescue Inukai from the pursuit of Kageura. The extended Scorpion took away Inukai’s left leg during the collapse of the walls so Tsuji scooted Inukai into his arms and carried the older teammate to flee from the scene.

The next Scorpion assault was prevented by a perfect shot from Hatohara, which helped Tsuji and Inukai successfully retreat.

“Thanks, Hatohara-chan!” Inukai said happily in the inter-com.

Tsuji glanced down at the senpai in his arms and caught the pair of teal eyes gazing at him affectionately.

“And you too.” Inukai whispered, “I know I can always trust Tsuji-chan.”

For a brief moment, Tsuji’s breath was taken away. “I’ll always come for you, Inukai-senpai.” And words rolled out from his tongue before his thoughts could even finish.

The pair of teal eyes widened a little before Inukai beamed, “So cool,” he said, eyes shining and

cheeks blushed, "I like you."

I like you too. Tsuji bit back the response at the tip of his tongue despite the tremendous urge to say so. "Please focus on the match." Tsuji said instead, although the bombardment behind his back and the bailout notice were more than enough to let him know the match was over.

...

"Tsuji-chan, catch!"

Tsuji snapped his head to the right and barely had enough time to catch a box of milk tossed to him. Inukai then waved his hand and ran to his classmates, not giving the younger teammate a chance to say a thank-you.

One of Inukai's confessions again. Tsuji thought as he observed the milk box, searching for the message probably written on the side or the bottom...

... only to find none.

Huh? Tsuji scanned over the box of milk again but really couldn't find anything.

"Ahhh, wait a minute, Tsuji-chan!"

Turning in the direction of the yelling, Tsuji saw his senpai running towards him at full speed.

"Did you forget something?"

"I forgot something!"

They said in unison, which made both flinch in surprise.

Then Inukai scratched the back of his head with a wry smile, "May I borrow the milk box for a few seconds?"

A huff escaped Tsuji's nose when he saw a pen in Inukai's left hand. "My answer is no, Inukai-senpai." he said with a slight smile.

"As in I can't borrow the box?" Inukai tilted his head to the side, clearly missing the point on purpose.

"No. As in I won't go out with you."

The second sentence was spoken in a whisper but Inukai didn't have any problem hearing it as he grinned, "At least I tried."

...

"Won't you go home, Inukai-senpai?" Tsuji asked when Inukai didn't seem to have any intention of leaving his seat in the strategy room. He had only said goodbye to Tsuji and focused on the tablet again.

"I'll after this record." Inukai answered vaguely without looking up.

Tsuji stared at his senpai.

The second season of this year's rank war had been over a week ago and they managed to maintain

their first place. According to Ninomiya, if they could stay in first place of B-rank for another season, they would have the chance to ascend to A-rank next year. Therefore, Tsuji totally got why Inukai was working hard because he was also doing so himself. However, recently, Inukai seemed to push himself harder than usual.

“You mean after all the records in your list, don’t you?” Tsuji asked, walking towards the table with his schoolbag in hand.

The door slid back to the closed position.

Inukai looked up again, tilting his head to the side with a smile. “What is it, Tsuji-chan?” he asked.

However, Tsuji didn’t answer but simply circled to Inukai’s back and took a look at the tab over the older teammate’s shoulders. Exactly as his guess, there were still four more records in the list under the one Inukai was watching.

“What is it, Tsuji-chan?” Inukai repeated as he turned halfway around, giving Tsuji a questioning look.

“Can I watch with you?” Tsuji asked, pulling out the chair beside Inukai.

“Eh? We’ve already gone through these during the meeting earlier.” Inukai lifted an eyebrow, gesturing with his hand at the tablet, “I’m just having a quick review. You should go home. It’s late.”

“It’s late.” Tsuji echoed, staring directly into the pair of teal eyes, “You should go home too.”

A moment of silence.

Then Inukai burst out laughing. “Is Tsuji-chan worrying about me?” he asked teasingly, putting a hand on his chest, “I’m touched.”

Tsuji frowned instantly, hands pushing the chair back under the table. “I’m only concerned that your grades will be affected if you keep staying late at the Border.” he said coldly, “Ninomiya-san won’t tolerate the drop in your academic performance, you know.”

“Don’t worry, I’m studying properly.” Inukai reassured, still laughing cheerily, “And with Tsuji-chan’s concern, I’ll do much better on the next exam.”

Tsuji let out an annoyed huff. He shouldn’t have worried about Inukai-

“Besides, the one who isn’t doing well isn’t me.”

From his peripheral vision, Tsuji caught a brief moment Inukai’s expression turning serious; however, when he fully turned to his senpai, the friendly smile had already been back on Inukai’s face.

“What do you mean?” Tsuji questioned.

“It’s Tsuji-chan, isn’t it?” Inukai grinned.

“What about me?” Tsuji raised his eyebrows confusedly, “I’m fine.”

“You won’t be fine if you don’t go home now. There’s only ten minutes left until your curfew.”

Tsuji gasped, checking the clock on Inukai’s tablet. Blurting out a silent curse when the older

teammate was correct, Tsuji hastily dashed towards the door.

“Tsuji-chan!” Inukai called when the door slid open and Tsuji had already had a foot outside.

“What is it?” Tsuji turned to his senpai, voice hurried.

“Love you.” Inukai made a heart with his hands.

Tsuji facepalmed. “I’m going home.” he said tiredly, “You should too.”

“Eh, what’s your answer?” Inukai pursed his lips

“Of course not.”

...

“Finish those problems before I come back *or else*.” was Ninomiya’s order for Inukai before leaving for the captain meeting.

Tsuji was making his own drink at the kitchenette while Ninomiya was teaching Inukai his Math homework. The studying session was peaceful until Inukai admitted that he had skipped his homework last week, which led to why he couldn’t solve the current problems.

Even when Ninomiya blasted his enemies into pieces with his overwhelming power, the captain still didn’t look as intimidating as at that moment. From a distance, Tsuji already felt chills running down his spine; he could only imagine how terrified Inukai was right beside the source of fury.

Luckily, after that, Ninomiya received a message from the higher ups and had to leave.

If not, Tsuji would probably have witnessed an execution right there and then.

Not knowing how much time had passed since Ninomiya had left the room, Tsuji put down his cup of hot cocoa that had turned warm and went to the table where Inukai was sitting and staring at his notebook.

“Are you okay, Inukai-senpai?” Tsuji asked worriedly, trying to sound as gentle as possible so as not to startle his senpai.

However, Inukai’s shoulders still went up to his ears upon hearing the question. He slowly turned to the side, meeting Tsuji’s gaze with a wry smile. “You saw it?” he scratched the back of his head embarrassedly.

“You greeted me when I came in earlier.” Tsuji reminded the older teammate.

“Ah true...” Inukai agreed, “Sorry for showing you-”

“I’ve seen plenty of your uncool moments already, senpai.” Tsuji interrupted before Inukai could finish the sentence. The older teammate sent him another shy smile before returning to his homework. Tsuji snuck a glance at the opened notebook and repeated his first question, “Are you okay?”

Letting out a long sigh, Inukai started writing the answers. “Would you believe me if I said yes?” he mumbled.

After a moment of silence, Tsuji answered honestly: “I don’t think so.”

“I know right.” Inukai shrugged.

Following Inukai’s hand, Tsuji couldn’t understand any of the written formulas despite being only a grade lower. Rokueikan wasn’t a prep school for nothing, he guessed. However, Inukai didn’t seem to have any difficulty completing them.

“I only asked Ninomiya-san to show me how to solve the last question.” As if reading Tsuji’s thoughts, Inukai said, pointing the tip of his pencil at the question at the bottom of the page.

“But...” Tsuji hesitated. The studying session had been pretty long, hadn’t it? Or not? Because it was only as long as the time Tsuji had spent finding the cocoa jar in the cupboard and making himself a drink.

“But?” Inukai looked up at Tsuji, tilting his head slightly to the side.

“I’m not sure but hasn’t Ninomiya-san taught you for quite some time?” asked Tsuji uncertainly.

“It was too long for just one problem, wasn’t it?” Inukai prompted, earning a nod from the younger teammate. “I also think so,” he smiled but his face quickly morphed into an exasperated expression, “but Ninomiya-san didn’t.”

Tsuji pulled out the chair beside Inukai and took a seat.

“He asked me to show him the solution I’ve come up with so he could point out where I went wrong.” Inukai continued, gesturing vaguely with his hand, “So I did as told and Ninomiya-san said that my approach was wrong, or in fact, my basis had *a lot of problems*.” He ran a palm over his face, “Therefore, I naïvely admitted that I had slacked off in class and hadn’t done last week’s homework...” He trailed off, letting out a long sigh, “Well, you know the rest of the story.”

Tsuji gave a reluctant nod as his mind recalled Ninomiya’s wrath and made a mental note not to *ever* take his study lightly, especially when his captain was around.

Wait. Last week? Wasn’t that when Inukai had stayed late at the Border to review the records of the last rank war season?

“Didn’t you tell me that you were studying properly?” Tsuji blurted out the question as soon as the memory came back to him.

“Huh?” Inukai blinked, giving Tsuji a clueless look.

“Last week, when I warned you about the consequences of staying late at the Border.” Tsuji reminded his senpai.

Inukai seemed thoughtful for a moment before making a soft ‘ah’.

“Are slacking off in class and skipping homework considered studying properly to you?” questioned Tsuji with his eyes narrowed.

An apologetic smile formed on Inukai’s lips. “Well, I thought I would do still do well with some slack-”

“No, you wouldn’t.” Tsuji said flatly, “Unless you’re that confident of your intelligence.”

Humming, Inukai then smiled carefreely, “I’m confident.” Tsuji rolled his eyes in an instant but before he could say something, the older teammate continued, “Not in my wits though, but because

I was blessed with Tsuji-chan's concern."

"What?" Tsuji blinked. What was Inukai talking about? Since when had he expressed his concern about the older teammate? Then it occurred to him a few moments later. "I wasn't concerned about you. I was just..." He halted. He did worry about Inukai's well being because his senpai seemed to over-exert himself recently. However, Tsuji would rather die than admit this right now since Inukai would deliberately take it the wrong way.

"Just?" Inukai lifted an eyebrow curiously.

Pressing his lips together, Tsuji averted his eyes to the side. "I was just *asking*," he mumbled.

Inukai giggled, "Sure you were." His tone clearly said he didn't buy it.

"That confidence almost got you executed by Ninomiya-san though," hating the feeling like he had lost, Tsuji added, "And you *may really be* if you don't finish all your homework now."

"Don't remind me please," said Inukai dejectedly as he hastily turned back to the notebook and started moving his pencil again.

However, as soon as Tsuji stood up, thinking of going to get his probably-cooled-long-ago cocoa, Inukai looked at him again with a wide grin on his face.

"Thanks for worrying about me, Tsuji-chan," said Inukai.

"I'm not-"

"Please add your love next time so that I'll be able to survive Ninomiya-san's wrath no matter how much I slack off."

"Please study properly, senpai," said Tsuji exasperatedly.

...

"Hey, Tsuji-chan. Do you know that it takes eighty eight days for men to fall in love?"

It was the end of September. The weather had turned slightly cold so not many students chose the rooftop for lunch anymore. There were still a few coming but all left as soon as they finished their meal instead of hanging around as usual.

Tsuji also planned to have lunch in the cafeteria but Inukai suddenly appeared at his classroom door and practically dragged him to the rooftop. That was why they were here – in the cold weather, by themselves – right now, and Inukai was free to talk about nonsensical topics without regard to their surroundings.

"No, I don't," answered Tsuji honestly. Seriously, who would calculate that?

"Today is the eighty eighth day since my first confession to Tsuji-chan," Inukai proceeded to explain his seemingly out-of-nowhere question, "So I wonder-"

"No, I don't," Tsuji interrupted.

"I haven't even finished my sentence," Inukai puffed his cheeks.

"I know what you're getting at," Tsuji deadpanned.

Inukai sent him a grin. “Tsuji-chan understands me so well now,” he teased.

How could Tsuji not when they had been at this for months already? Of course, there were still a few coming as a surprise, but most of the time, Tsuji could predict those confessions before the question even left Inukai’s lips.

Suddenly, something sparked in Tsuji’s head, so he asked: “Did we meet before Ninomiya-san recruited Inukai-senpai?”

“Eh?” Inukai blurted out confusedly. Then he held his chin, seemingly deliberating over the matter. Tsuji waited for him patiently. After a while, Inukai shook his head, “No, I don’t think so. Why do you ask?” He tilted his head slightly to the side with an eyebrow raised.

“Because it takes men eighty eight days to fall in love, but you confessed to me only a month after our first meeting.” Tsuji reasoned, “So we had to meet before that, hadn’t we?”

Inukai’s eyes widened as his eyebrows shot up, seeming like realization had just dawned on him.

“What’s wrong?” asked Tsuji defensively, feeling like an idiot for basing his logic on unfounded information.

However, Inukai shook his head rapidly. “No, nothing’s wrong.” he reassured.

“Then why are you looking like that?” Tsuji narrowed his eyes doubtfully.

Inukai made a long hum, crossing his arms. “Looking like what?” he smiled, clearly playing dumb.

“Like you’ve just remembered something.” There was no way Tsuji would let the older teammate get away that easily.

“Maybe? Maybe not?” Inukai said vaguely, maintaining his smile as if he was joking with a kid.

Tsuji frowned. Whenever Inukai behaved like this, the conversation wouldn’t progress. So he cut to the chase, “When was it?”

“Eh?”

“When did you fall for me?” Tsuji clarified, staring straight at his senpai, who seemed to be caught off-guard.

Inukai blinked once, and then stared back at the younger teammate. His playful grin vanished from his lips for a moment before returning as a more sincere smile before he put a finger on his lips.

“That’s a secret that I will tell Tsuji-chan after you accept my confession.”

Stupefied for a brief second, Tsuji inadvertently evaded the meaningful gaze from his senpai. “I won’t...” he mumbled, hating the uncertainty in his own voice.

Luckily, the bell announcing the end of lunch break saved him from further embarrassment.

...

October arrived with the beginning of the third season of rank war. With the target set by Ninomiya – becoming A-rank at the end of this season, everyone had been working extra hard either at the Border or at school because midterm was also nearing.

Before Tsuji knew it, a week had passed since the last time he had hung out with Inukai at school.

It was somewhat hard to believe that he couldn't even catch sight of his older teammate despite being only a floor apart. The only time they met each other was at the Border and most conversations were about strategies there.

Tsuji was also busy, but wasn't to the point of not having time to hang out with friends so he wondered what kept Inukai occupied. It couldn't be schoolwork, could it? Because Inukai wasn't very serious about his study except for the subjects he liked such as English or Japanese literature. Therefore, Tsuji guessed it was related to the Border. However, if it was about the rank war, why didn't Inukai come to him for discussion like before? They had become more and more in sync but there were still a lot of places for improvement.

Not to mention Inukai's confessing agenda... *but that was irrelevant.*

Anyhow, pondering on this matter wouldn't earn Tsuji a satisfying answer, so he decided to look for his senpai instead.

"Eh? Tsuji-chan?" was Inukai's reaction when Tsuji gathered all his will and appeared at Inukai's classroom.

Closing his notebook in a hurry, Inukai rushed to the door and pulled Tsuji towards one of the corridor's windows to avoid blocking the way.

"Do you need something?" asked Inukai as soon as they had some privacy.

Tsuji opened his mouth but nothing came out so he pressed his lips together, averting his eyes to the side. Inukai didn't rush him but looked at the cloudy sky outside the window instead. After a few moments, Tsuji moved his gaze back to his senpai and coincidentally met the pair of teal eyes as Inukai also turned back. The familiar smile bloomed on the older teammate's lips.

"It's lunch." said Tsuji, completely different from what he had planned to ask, "Let's get something to eat."

"Sure, I'm also hungry." Inukai nodded, rubbing his stomach to demonstrate his point.

Because it had already been too late to rush to the cafeteria for the popular dishes, they only strolled down the stairs.

"I never expect Tsuji-chan to come to fetch me for lunch." Inukai said excitedly, throwing an arm over Tsuji's shoulders. "Do you miss me?" he whispered.

Tsuji glanced at his senpai, who immediately morphed his teasing smile into a perfectly innocent one. "No, I don't." he said monotonously, earning a knowing giggle from Inukai. "But I'm worried," he added.

"What're you worried about?" Inukai raised an eyebrow curiously.

Biting his lower lips, Tsuji ran the answer through his mind once more to make sure it wouldn't be taken the wrong way. "Aren't you working too hard lately?" was what coming out after a minute of consideration.

"Huh?" Inukai blurted out, seemingly confused for a moment before shaking his head lightly, "No?" He scratched the back of his head with his free hand, "I mean, isn't it the same for everyone?"

"Not really," Tsuji mumbled, "unless you're serious about studying."

“Oi, I’m always serious.” Inukai protested.

Tsuji gave his senpai a long look without saying anything.

“Okay, maybe *not very*, but I make sure to maintain my scores at an appropriate level.” Inukai surrendered, averting his eyes to the side, but didn’t look embarrassed in the least.

Huffing in victory, Tsuji proceeded with the walk, practically dragging Inukai along as the older teammate’s arm was still on his shoulders.

“Thanks for worrying about me.” Inukai whispered when they reached the cafeteria’s entrance, “This is why I like Tsuji-chan the best.”

Before Tsuji could react, Inukai had already retracted his hand and took a step forward into the crowd.

...

The thirty second confession appeared inside Tsuji’s table in the shape of a cookie bag.

Obviously, there was nothing noted about the sender and only a piece of carefully written paper saying ‘*Have a good day. Love you.*’ inside. However, it wasn’t hard to guess whose this was from, considering the amount of time Tsuji spent reading this handwriting over the past few months. Still, it was a mystery how Inukai had planted this without anyone knowing.

After a long day being teased by his classmates for the anonymous gift, Tsuji took the bag of cookies straight to the strategy room. As soon as the door slid open, Inukai waved at him with a cheery smile on his lips. In front of the older teammate were two cups with visible steam coming from the surface as if he had predicted the exact time Tsuji would come to prepare.

“You clearly did this on purpose.” Tsuji condemned as he dropped down to his seat a bit too forcefully.

Inukai neither denied nor agreed but simply pushed the cocoa cup towards Tsuji, who opened the bag and threw a cookie into his mouth without reserve.

“Is it good?” asked Inukai, tilting his head to the side.

“It is.” Tsuji confirmed, enjoying the sweetness spreading on his tongue. However, he still sent Inukai a stern gaze, “But please don’t do this again.”

“Roger.” replied Inukai jokingly, clearly enjoying the suffering Tsuji had gone through.

“This is why falling for Inukai-senpai is impossible.” Tsuji deadpanned as he stuffed another cookie into his mouth and chewed like it had personally offended him.

Inukai just laughed.

...

‘Do you have time this weekend?’

This message had arrived yesterday while Tsuji had been buried by his homework so he hadn’t taken a look until now – when Inukai was gulping down his lunch across the table.

“I’ll be free on Saturday,” said Tsuji casually.

It took him two times repeating to finally attract Inukai's attention due to all the noise in the cafeteria. "Great." said Inukai contently, "Let's meet up at the Border at eight a.m. Saturday morning."

"But why?"

However, lunch break ended before Inukai gave his answer so he simply told Tsuji that he would know the reason on Saturday and hurriedly dashed back to his class. It seemed there would be a Math exam this afternoon so Inukai had to review.

Well, Tsuji guessed there wouldn't be any harm in entertaining Inukai for a day. He didn't have any plans anyway.

Still, now that Tsuji thought about it, he barely knew what Inukai was like off work or school. Of course he could recall a few yakiniku gatherings but he didn't exactly pay attention to Inukai except for when the older teammate naturally led the flow of the conversation whenever an awkward silent moment emerged. However, this time would be different because Ninomiya, Hiyami or Hatoraha wouldn't be around.

Tsuji wondered what they would talk about if it wasn't about the Border, schoolwork, or Inukai's confessions...

He really didn't know anything about Inukai, did he?

With that question hanging, weekends came and Tsuji went to the Border fifteen minutes before the appointed time.

"Tsuji-kun? You're early."

Calling out to Tsuji was Hiyami in a casual getup with a cream turtleneck sweater and a long brown skirt. Beside her was Hatohara with a similar sweater and a pair of blue jeans. Inukai was nowhere to be found.

Surprised but Tsuji still approached his teammates and exchanged basic greetings. He soon learnt that Hatohara and Hiyami had also received similar invitations from Inukai. The only difference was that they knew the purpose of today's gathering: to buy presents for Ninomiya's incoming birthday.

Yes, it was just that simple and could be explained in under five seconds, yet Inukai still left Tsuji wondering. What a *kind* senpai he was.

After a few more minutes, Inukai finally arrived, dressed in a simple white hoodie and a pair of faded blue jeans. And the group proceeded to choose the direct route leading to a shopping mall.

While Hiyami and Hatohara were ahead chatting happily, Inukai decelerated to wait for Tsuji, who was walking about four or five steps behind the girls.

"Please inform me of the squad activity properly next time." said Tsuji monotonously without looking at the senpai beside him.

"Squad activity?" Inukai echoed confusedly, "I don't know if this counts as one."

"You've gathered almost everyone in the squad. So it is." Tsuji pointed out.

"But we're here for personal business, aren't we?"

“I don’t know. You never told me.” said Tsuji coldly.

There was a moment of silence. Then a chuckle was heard.

“Are you sulking?” Inukai asked amusedly, sounding like he was trying hard not to burst out laughing, “Tsuji-chan is so cute.”

Snapping his head towards Inukai, Tsuji shot him one of his worst frowns. “Yes, I am.” knowing trying to deny would only lead to more teasing, he admitted and clearly took Inukai by surprise as the older teammate’s eyes widened, “I didn’t even know that Hatohara-senpai and Hiyami-san were also invited.”

“S-sorry.” Inukai stuttered uncharacteristically, probably perplexed by Tsuji’s abrupt forwardness.

They stared at each other for a while before realizing that they had unconsciously stopped walking and hurriedly catching up with the girls.

“I’m sorry for the unclear invitation.” Inukai repeated his apology, lowering his head sincerely.

Tsuji gestured with his hand that it was nothing. “It’s also my fault for assuming.” he reassured when Inukai still wore the guilty expression.

“Assuming...” Inukai recited the word, looking thoughtful for a second before it hit him. “Oh, so-”

“Please don’t say anything anymore, senpai.” Tsuji immediately interrupted the older teammate. Embarrassment finally caught up to him. He had outright admitted that he was expecting to be alone with Inukai. What could be more embarrassing?

Inukai coughed a few times, probably trying to suppress his laughter to no avail because his shoulders were already shaking. After almost a minute, he managed to get it under control and turned to Tsuji with a soft smile. His cheeks were slightly blushed from holding back his laugh earlier.

“I’ll ask you out on a date next time. Promise.” Inukai vowed, raising a hand to boost the seriousness but in Tsuji’s eyes, that gesture was more like mocking.

So the younger teammate deadpanned, “I don’t need it.”

...

The shopping trip was more fruitful than Tsuji had expected. Because each of them only knew a part of Ninomiya, gathering together helped put together the whole picture of their captain, which made choosing a birthday present easier.

Hatohara and Hiyami agreed on buying yarn so they could knit a scarf and a beanie hat for Ninomiya to prepare for the incoming winter. Meanwhile, Inukai got a keychain with the mascot of the captain’s favorite ginger ale brand. Tsuji wanted something more practical so he bought a neck pillow, considering the amount of time Ninomiya spent working on a computer.

After achieving the goal of the trip, they parted ways at the Border entrance. Hatohara accompanied Hiyami to her house so they could begin their knitting projects together. On the other hand, because Inukai and Tsuji’s houses are located in the same neighborhood, they walked with each other for a while.

“Hatohara-chan and Hiyami-chan are incredible, aren’t they?” Inukai started the conversation as

usual.

Knowing what his senpai was referring to, Tsuji agreed, “Yes, they are.”

“I should’ve chosen something more meaningful.” Inukai said regretfully, looking at the gift box in his hand, “This will pale in comparison to those two’s gifts.”

Tsuji took a quick glance at the neck pillow in his arms. He didn’t think much when he had decided but now that Inukai said it, this pillow was somewhat mediocre compared to Hatohara and Hiyami’s hand-crafted gifts.

Well, what was done was done. There was no point dwelling on this.

“Not like we can knit something for Ninomiya-san anyway.” Tsuji shrugged.

“Actually, I know a bit about knitting.” Inukai said.

Wow, that was surprising. Tsuji immediately looked at his senpai, scanning for a sign of lying but found none. So Inukai really knew how to knit. How unexpected.

“My sisters wanted to study knitting at some point so they forced me to join them for some time before they both gave up.” Seemingly reading the question in Tsuji’s mind, Inukai explained, “I only know the basis though.”

“I see.” Tsuji nodded understandingly. “Why don’t you join the girls then? Knitting a pair of gloves for Ninomiya-san, maybe?” he suggested.

“Didn’t I just tell you that I only know a bit of the basis?” Inukai asked exasperatedly.

“Hatohara-senpai and Hiyami-san can teach you, I believe.” Tsuji reasoned.

“Well, that’s plausible, but Ninomiya-san’s birthday is around the corner. I wouldn’t make it even if I tried.” Inukai threw out a hand, shrugging. “Besides, if I’m going to make an effort to learn knitting, I will only do it for the one I love.”

Even when Inukai didn’t specify who it was, the affection in his teal eyes and the warmth from the smile on his lips told more than enough. And Tsuji hated that he understood this instantly.

Turning away, Tsuji mumbled, “You’ve confessed your love to Ninomiya-san already.”

“Wh-What?” Inukai stuttered incredulously, “That’s super mean, Tsuji-chan!”

...

“Tsuji-kun, watch out!”

The warning came too late. Tsuji’s elbow had already knocked over something and a crash resounded a moment later.

Not wasting a second, Tsuji hastily crouched down to pick up the... *airplane model*? Luckily, the model was only broken in half – yes, he knew this was awful enough already – so he could tell what it was. However, since when was there an airplane model in the Operator room?

Holding two halves of the model in his hands, Tsuji racked his memory to find whose this was to no avail. Based on what had happened, this airplane model had to be displayed on the cabinet beside the shelves where his dinosaurs were located. That was how he had accidentally knocked

this over while focusing on cleaning his dinosaurs. Yet, if his memory still served him correctly, there shouldn't be anything on the cabinet. It had always been empty, hadn't it?

"Tsuji-kun, how is- Ah, it's broken in half?!" Hiyami exclaimed as soon as she peeked in from Tsuji's side.

"What is this, Hiyami-san?" Tsuji asked confusedly, holding out the remains of the airplane, "I don't think I've ever seen it before."

Hiyami averted her eyes to the side, avoiding the sorry sight of the model. "It belongs to Inukai-senpai." she whispered, almost inaudible, "He placed it on the cabinet yesterday."

No wonder Tsuji wasn't aware of it. He had been stuck at school yesterday to review for today's exam so he hadn't come to the Border for the regular meeting.

None of that mattered now though. He should think about how to fix this first.

With that line of thinking, Tsuji brought the broken airplane model to the Operator desk and started looking for glue or tape, or anything that could temporarily connect these two parts. Hiyami was as pale as a sheet but still tried her best to help Tsuji.

Unfortunately, paper glue wasn't strong enough and tape just made the broken model look atrocious.

"Let me bring this home and ask my older brother for help," said Tsuji after several futile attempts. "Can you make up some reason to explain to Inukai-senpai when he arrives?" he asked, staring at Hiyami pleadingly.

"But..." Hiyami hesitated.

"Please, Hiyami-san." Tsuji appealed again, "I promise I'll return this unscathed tomorrow."

"What are you two whispering among yourselves about?"

Never in Tsuji's life was he that startled. His heart literally shot out of his throat as he almost jumped to the ceiling. Beside him, Hiyami let out a squeak and froze where she stood.

Because they both recognized the voice.

Yes, it was the owner of the poor airplane model: Inukai Sumiharu – the Gunner who had been recruited by Ninomiya only a few months ago yet constantly proved his ability to be the perfect balancer of the squad. The senpai who had confessed his love to Tsuji out of the blue and was still pursuing him tirelessly. The person who always smiled without fail no matter the situation... And many more. However, nothing was said about how Inukai would react when his belongings were damaged.

While Tsuji's thoughts were running wild in his head, Inukai's light footsteps approached him and Hiyami.

There was no time to think anymore. Tsuji glanced at the Operator but Hiyami had already become a statue. Therefore, he swirled around, putting on his most natural smile, "Good afternoon, Inukai-senpai."

"Hi, Tsuji-chan."

The instant their eyes met, a delightful expression bloomed on Inukai's face as if that was all he was waiting for, and guilt immediately pierced Tsuji's heart that he inhaled sharply on reflex.

"Hi, Hiyami-chan." Inukai continued but noticed the Operator's tension, "Huh? What's wrong?"

As Inukai looked over Tsuji's shoulder to find what Hiyami was looking at, Tsuji squeezed his eyes shut, bracing himself for the worst.

A gasp was heard.

Yet, strangely, it sounded more surprised than horrified.

And...

"What's that?" asked Inukai.

Snapping his eyes open, Tsuji found Inukai holding his chin with his head tilting slightly to the side, expression genuinely curious.

Seemingly having the same confusion as Tsuji, Hiyami whipped her head towards Inukai, giving him an incredulous look. "It-It's yours, Inukai-senpai." she stuttered, grabbing the remains of the airplane model on the table and holding them out to the older teammate.

"Eh?" Inukai raised his eyebrows in bafflement, "It's mine?"

Then the three of them stared at each other for a few moments as long as centuries before Inukai made an 'ah' as if it had just occurred to him.

"Ah right, I brought that in yesterday, didn't I?" he said uncertainly, scratching his cheek.

Hiyami gave a firm nod. Then seemingly remembering that it wasn't a happy or joyful event, she shyly added, "Yes, you did..."

"It's broken already?" Inukai asked amusedly, taking the remains from Hiyami's hand. "Well, it can't be helped then." He shrugged... and *threw* those into the nearby trash can.

Tsuji gasped audibly. "Wh-What-" was all Tsuji managed.

"Eh?" Inukai turned to Tsuji questioningly, "Shouldn't I do that?"

"Isn't it yours?" Tsuji didn't answer but questioned back instead. When Inukai gave a simple nod, he continued, "Why do you throw it away?"

"Because it's broken, isn't it?" Inukai lifted an eyebrow like it was obvious.

"Don't you..." Tsuji struggled, unable to find the right words with all the messy thoughts in his head.

"Don't I want to fix it?" Inukai prompted.

Yes, that. Tsuji nodded rapidly while mentally giving himself a punch for his inability to come up with such a simple term. But who could blame him? Even in his wildest dream, he wouldn't *think* of throwing away one of his dinosaurs, let alone *to do* it. Yet, here Inukai was, throwing his airplane model straight into the trashcan without batting an eye.

Inukai hummed, wrinkling his eyebrows. "It's fine." he finally said, shrugging, "It's not that

important so I wouldn't waste time trying to fix it."

Oh, so that's why. "I see", Tsuji gave an understanding nod, secretly letting out a sigh of relief. Maybe that airplane model was only for decoration purpose and didn't hold any special meaning. It seemed that he had been too hasty to think it was the same as the dinosaurs to him.

"Are we done here?" asked Inukai. The two younger teammates nodded. "Let's review our strategy for the next rank war."

"Roger." Tsuji and Hiyami said in unison.

"Oi, I'm not Ninomiya-san." Inukai reminded them with an exasperated smile.

Tsuji and Hiyami shared an almost mischievous look. No one knew when it had begun but somehow, Inukai – the supposed newcomer of the squad – had been acknowledged as Ninomiya's second in command by the others.

The airplane incident was quickly forgotten after the meeting started.

However, at the end of the day, on the way out of the Border HQ, Tsuji's mind drifted back to his mistake and he turned to Inukai, who was walking on his right side, for the final confirmation, "Is it really okay, Inukai-senpai?"

"Huh?" Inukai raised an eyebrow, "What is okay?"

"The airplane model that I broke earlier..." Tsuji trailed off, feeling the guilt coming back and gnawing at his heart again.

"You did?" Inukai seemed surprised, "I thought it was Hiyami-chan. She was as pale as a sheet when I greeted you two."

"I did." Tsuji affirmed, bowing his head, "I'm really sorry."

"It's fine, it's fine." Inukai waved his hand dismissively with a carefree smile, but then something crossed his mind and his smile morphed into an impish one, "Hmm, but if Tsuji-chan feels bad about it then maybe you can go on a date with me as compensa-"

"I won't." Tsuji interrupted, turning away, "I shouldn't have worried about you."

"Ahh, stingy." Inukai whined.

Their conversation moved to other topics and they continued to joke around until they reached the entrance of the HQ.

"Ah!" Inukai suddenly let out a surprised sound, startling Tsuji a bit. "I think I forgot my house keys in the strategy room." he said exasperatedly, annoyed at his forgetful self, "Sorry, Tsuji-chan. You can go first; I'll catch up with you later."

"I can wait-" said Tsuji but Inukai had already run off.

Sighing, Tsuji continued his walk. Of course he could wait here for Inukai to come back but that could give his senpai false hope since they hadn't agreed on anything. Therefore, it would be better to go ahead as he was told to...

... except that Tsuji also forgot something in the strategy room: the cleaning kit that he had brought for the maintenance of his dinosaur models. It had totally slipped his mind the moment he

had knocked over the airplane nearby.

Letting out a silent curse, Tsuji bolted in the direction leading to the squad's room.

The automatic door was left open. Inukai had probably set it on hold so he could quickly grab his keys and get out. However, Tsuji hadn't met his senpai on the way here so... don't tell him Inukai was still searching?

With that thought, Tsuji walked into the main room, thinking of teasing his senpai a bit if Inukai was still rummaging through his locker. However, no one was there.

The light from the Operator room caught Tsuji's eyes and he unknowingly walked towards it.

And there he found Inukai.

Standing beside the trash can. Expression empty and unreadable. In his hands were the remains of the airplane model.

Ah... Tsuji took a step backwards and hastily ran out of the room. How *ignorant* he was.

...

The next day, Tsuji was a bunch of nerves throughout the whole morning, preparing to face Inukai with his most natural attitude because he had learnt of something he wasn't supposed to.

Inukai had purposely played it off as if the broken airplane meant nothing to him, so it was Tsuji's duty to keep up with the pretense or he would make it awkward for both of them, and even for Hiyami. However, he had never expected it would be that difficult to tell a white lie.

What expression should he show when Inukai came to fetch him for lunch? What would he respond if Inukai surprised him with one of his creative confessions? Should he deny as usual or agree to go on a date as compensation like Inukai had suggested- *No*, that was a cowardly way out of this. There was no way Tsuji could take advantage of his senpai's affection to weasel out of the mistake he had made.

He had to face this head on and ask for Inukai's forgiveness. That was the one and only way to right this blunder.

However, no matter how long Tsuji waited, Inukai never came to his classroom. And the lunch break ended with Tsuji hastily stuffing his stomach with a sandwich bought by his classmate.

The same scenario played out for another day before Tsuji learnt that second-year students were swamped by exams just like how he was last week. Maybe that was why Inukai didn't come to find him...

Was it?

Was Inukai someone who would fully focus on exams? No. Even if Tsuji lied to himself that Inukai might be a diligent student once in a blue moon, deep down inside he knew that wasn't true. There had to be something keeping the older teammate from looking for Tsuji.

And he had an inkling that he knew the answer.

"Gotta run now. See you later, everyone."

As soon as the meeting to review the rank war match ended, Inukai gathered all his belongings and

swiftly left the strategy room. Tsuji hastily grabbed his bag and ran after his senpai, not forgetting to bid goodbyes to the remaining teammates.

It wasn't until today Tsuji discovered Inukai's speed in his flesh body. Even at his top speed, he couldn't catch up to Inukai at all. The older teammate didn't lie about *running*, did he?

After five minutes sprinting, Tsuji had no choice but taking out his phone and dialing the number on the top of his list.

"What's the matter, Tsuji-chan?" a surprised voice rang from the other side of the line, "It's rare for you to call me this late."

"Can you please... stop running?" Tsuji asked in the middle of his panting.

"Eh?" Inukai blurted out, then remained silent for a few seconds, probably to process what Tsuji was talking about, before agreeing, "Sure. I stopped to pick up your call anyway. Where are you now? Do you want me to go back?"

"No..." Tsuji shook his head out of habit, trying to regulate his breathing while jogging forward, "... just stay where you are... Please." he added lately.

It took Tsuji a couple of minutes to finally see the familiar figure from afar, leaning on the surrounding wall of a house beside a street lamp. Before Tsuji could call out, Inukai spotted the younger teammate and waved at him excitedly.

Waiting for Tsuji to catch his breath, Inukai offered him a handkerchief to wipe the sweat running down his forehead. "Is it some urgent document from Ninomiya-san?" Inukai guessed. Tsuji shook his head. "Or did I forget something in the strategy room?" he tried again, checking his pockets, "But my keys are here."

"You didn't forget anything." Tsuji responded before Inukai could get to his third guess, "I just have something to give Inukai-senpai."

"Eh?" taken aback, Inukai blurted out, his teal eyes slightly widened. "Tsuji-chan has something for me?" he confirmed, seemingly not believing his own ears.

Opening his schoolbag, Tsuji carefully took out what he had prepared: a box-shaped object wrapped in thin gray fabric, and held it towards Inukai. "Please accept this." He bowed down sharply.

There was a moment of silence. However, only when the weight on his hands was taken, Tsuji lifted his head.

Inukai stared at the object with great curiosity but he didn't make any movement to open the wrapper. After a while, the pair of teal eyes left the gray fabric and met Tsuji's gaze. "What is this?" Inukai asked, sounding half confused and half eager.

"Pteranodon." Tsuji answered.

Inukai blinked. "Pardon?" he said, "Pte-what?"

"Pteranodon." Tsuji repeated firmly.

Inukai paused, closing his eyes for a few seconds, then changed his hold to one-handed and raised his free hand, his index finger pointing out. "Ptera-what again?" he asked with great difficulty.

“Pteranodon.” Tsuji repeated once again, totally patient.

However, Inukai let out a long sigh as if giving up. “Okay,” he said, “I don’t think I’ll get that foreign word no matter how many times you repeat it, so I’ll just open this and figure out by myself.” and proceeded to untie the wrapping cloth.

A glass box with a wooden bottom soon emerged. In the middle of the box was a...

“Dinosaur?” was Inukai’s question as soon as he saw the content.

“No, it’s a pterosaur.” Tsuji corrected.

“Wait, it sounds different from the word you said earlier.” Inukai pointed out, “You said it was Ptera-something, not ptero-something.”

“Pteranodon is a pterosaur.” Tsuji explained, “That’s why it isn’t a dinosaur.”

There was a pause again, then Inukai simply smiled. “Okay, got it.” he said, wearing a smile that totally said *‘I don’t know what you are talking about but I’ll just pretend that I get it’*.

Tsuji didn’t know the meaning of that smile until much later so he nodded contentedly, “That’s great.”

“So... why do you give me this Ptera-whatever-it-is?” Inukai asked, tilting his head to the side.

It was Tsuji’s turn to be quiet, but Inukai didn’t rush him so after a couple of minutes fidgeting, he whispered, “Because that’s the closest model to an airplane that I have.” Then Tsuji squeezed his eyes shut.

During the period when the second-year students had been busy with exams, Tsuji had deliberated this over and over again. At first, he had thought of buying a similar airplane model but he hadn’t known anything about airplanes nor remembered the features of the broken one. Therefore, after careful consideration, he had decided to go with what he had known best.

However, now that the situation was actually happening, Tsuji realized how ridiculous his point was, so all he could do now was bracing himself for a series of laughter.

Yet it never came.

When Tsuji opened his eyes, Inukai had already turned his back to him.

“Thanks, Tsuji-chan.” Inukai said, taking a step forward, “I’ll take good care of this Ptera-whatchamacallit.”

“Pteranodon.” Tsuji corrected again, almost slipping a chuckle.

“Ptera-chan then.” Inukai decided, lifting the glass box containing the Pteranodon model over his head, “Say goodbye to your ex-owner, Ptera-chan, you’ll be in my custody from now on and you won’t see him until he agrees to be my boyfriend.”

Tsuji sighed exasperatedly at the childish speech from his supposed-to-be-older teammate.

“Which is soon, so you don’t have to miss him.” added Inukai.

“No, I won’t.” Tsuji responded instantly.

“Ah, poor Ptera-chan. Your ex-owner has officially abandoned you.”

“Please stop it, Inukai-senpai.”

...

Midterms were finally over. And Tsuji was kidnapped by his dark-blond-haired teammate the exact moment he stepped out of his class in the afternoon.

Okay, kidnapping was a bit exaggerated, but Inukai had literally grabbed Tsuji’s wrist and pulled him to an ice cream store located somewhere close to Rokueikan high school, claiming to celebrate their *survival* through the exam season.

There weren’t many customers in the store, probably because the cool autumn weather wasn’t the perfect time for ice cream. However, since Inukai declared that it was his treat, Tsuji guessed he could have a cup or two.

While Inukai went to order the ice cream at the counter, Tsuji took a look around. The main color theme of the store was brown and beige, which fitted the classic furniture and decorations while giving a warm atmosphere. Then something caught his attention.

‘Decorate the ice cream yourself to surprise your loved one!’ the ad banner read. Below the words were several pictures containing loving messages written in chocolate on the ice cream balls. Some were neatly written, some were clumsy, but they had probably served their purpose: surprise the receiver.

A huff escaped Tsuji’s nose. Now he knew why Inukai had chosen this place.

“Here, Tsuji-chan.” Inukai’s voice chimed together with a cup of vanilla ice cream placed in front of Tsuji.

Then Inukai took the opposite seat with his own cup in hand.

“Thank you, senpai.” Tsuji said politely, moving his gaze from the banner to the ice cream cup, knowing what he would find, “but I-” He halted.

There wasn’t anything aside from the common vanilla ice cream balls. No matter from which angle he observed, there wasn’t anything out of the ordinary.

Except... for Inukai, who had a hand over his cup as if trying to block his ice cream from view.

“Inukai-senpai,” called Tsuji.

“Huh? What is it, Tsuji-chan?” Inukai looked up, flashing his familiar smile.

“What’s your ice cream flavor?”

“Vanilla, like yours.” Inukai grinned.

“Then why are you covering it?” Tsuji wrinkled his eyebrows.

“Eh? No, I am not.” Inukai denied, still having his hand over the cup.

“You clearly are.”

“No, you’re imagining things, Tsuji-chan.” Inukai stubbornly stood his ground. “Eat your ice

cream or it will melt,” he urged.

Tsuji narrowed his eyes doubtfully, to which Inukai smiled back ever so innocently.

“Okay, I believe you.” Tsuji gave up, picking up his spoon.

Inukai did the same.

“Ah, Ninomiya-san.” Tsuji suddenly stopped his hand, looking over Inukai’s shoulders.

“Huh?” Inukai turned his head.

Not wasting another second, Tsuji stretched out his hand towards Inukai’s cup of ice cream. However, before he could touch, it was pulled out of reach. When he looked up, the pair of teal eyes met his gaze, arching amusedly.

“Tricking your senpai isn’t something a good kouhai should do, Tsuji-chan.” Inukai reprimanded the younger teammate jokingly.

Caught red-handed, Tsuji was left with no excuse, so he could only avert his eyes to the side and mumble an apology. Inukai waved his free hand, signaling that it was fine.

And that was all Tsuji needed.

Without the cover, the chocolate message on the vanilla background came into plain view.

Messier than any of the messages shown on the ad banner, the chocolate writings on Inukai’s ice cream bore a few simple words: *‘I ... Tsuji-chan’* The one in the middle wasn’t a blank but something that Tsuji couldn’t tell if it was a word or a drawing. It looked like a badly drawn circle, resembling an orange that a three-year-old would draw.

Before Tsuji knew it, he had already let loose a laugh.

Inukai seemed clueless for a moment before realizing what was happening. “N-No, th-this is-” he stuttered, hastily covering his ice cream again.

“I thought Inukai-senpai is good at drawing.” Tsuji said, trying his best to muffle his laugh to no avail as laughter kept bubbling up from his stomach every time he remembered the badly drawn *orange*.

“It-It’s my first time dr-drawing with chocolate.” Inukai stumbled through his too-fast explanation, his cheeks turning an alarming red color.

Unable to reply without laughing, Tsuji could only try his best to give an understanding nod, which looked like he was making fun of Inukai because his shoulders kept shaking from holding back his laughter.

“B-But you still got the message right?” Inukai clung to the last hope.

“Yes,” Tsuji affirmed, taking a deep breath so he wouldn’t burst out laughing, “But what does *‘I orange Tsuji-chan’* mean?”

“It’s a heart!” Inukai yelled, “You clearly misunderstood it on purpose. Meanie Tsuji!”

And that was Tsuji’s limit.

“Stop laughing or I won’t love you anymore, Tsuji-chan!”

...

A few days later, Tsuji found an orange on his table in class so he brought it to the strategy room after school. Obviously he had a guess but there was nothing definite to indicate from who it was. He just took it here because he didn’t exactly enjoy eating sour fruit. Maybe Hiyami or Hatohara could make better use of this orange.

“Good afternoon, Tsuji-chan.”

Welcoming Tsuji was the familiar senpai. How Inukai always managed to arrive first despite them leaving school at the same time was beyond Tsuji.

“Good afternoon, Inukai-senpai.” greeted Tsuji with a slight bow. Then he put his bag into the locker and walked over to his seat, putting the orange on the table. “Thanks for the gift.” he said casually as he sat down.

“You’re welcome.” Inukai grinned, not even trying to deny or hide the fact.

Tsuji proceeded to peel off the skin and divided it into half, then offered one part to Inukai.

“No, you eat all of it.” Inukai shook his head, declining.

“Why?” Tsuji lifted an eyebrow.

“Just eat it.” The older teammate insisted.

“I won’t eat it until senpai tells me the reason.” Tsuji said adamantly.

Probably knowing Tsuji wouldn’t back down, Inukai gave in, “Fine. Remember our ice cream date a few days ago?”

“It wasn’t-”

“I know, I know. It wasn’t a date.” Inukai interrupted nonchalantly, waving his hand, “But do you remember my message for you?”

Tsuji gave a simple nod, trying his best to remain composed despite the strong urge to spill out a laugh upon remembering the messily written message.

“You purposely mistook my heart for an orange so...” Inukai stopped talking and pointed at the orange in Tsuji’s hands, smiling, “... I gave my heart to you.”

Stupefied for a few seconds, Tsuji then coughed because he couldn’t decide if he should laugh or cringe.

“I’ve told you the reason,” said Inukai with his familiar smile while propping his cheek with a hand, probably having expected the younger teammate’s reaction, “now it’s Tsuji-chan’s turn to eat my gift.”

Taking another look at the two halves of the orange, Tsuji held out a part towards Inukai again. “I’ll give you half of it after all.” he said.

“So you accept half of my love?” Inukai asked hopefully.

“No, because it’s rude to just give back a gift.”

Inukai giggled as he received half of the orange, “That’s good enough. I’ll take what I can get from Tsuji-chan’s affection.” He whispered, separating the pulp into smaller segments and putting a piece into his mouth, savoring it with a contented smile.

And for some reason, Tsuji couldn’t taste anything else besides the sweetness from the remaining half of the orange.

...

“Let’s go over our plan one last time.” said Inukai seriously. The other three members in the Ninomiya squad gave a firm nod. “First, I’ll ask Ninomiya-san to go to the city library with me and try to buy as much time as possible. Then during that time, Hatohara-chan and Hiyami-chan will decorate our strategy room. Meanwhile, Tsuji-chan will go to the bakery to get the cake we’ve ordered. After everything is ready, you three will send texts in the group chat, saying there is an emergency-”

“Wait, what if Ninomiya-san alerts other squads?” Hiyami raised her hand.

“Hmm, you’re right.” Inukai agreed, making a long hum. “How about texting me saying you accidentally spilled water on some important document?” he suggested, “Then I can pretend to freak out and slip my tongue.”

“Ninomiya-san will probably scold me through the phone before coming here...” Hiyami mumbled, averting her eyes to the table.

“Tsuji-chan then?” Inukai glanced at the black-haired Attacker.

Tsuji dodged his look. Not that he was afraid of being reprimanded, but he would probably spill the beans if Ninomiya called him directly.

However, before Tsuji could say his reason, a hand was raised. “I can...” Hatohara whispered almost soundlessly. The other three snapped their gaze towards her. “I’m... used to being scolded by Ninomiya-san so...” She left the sentence unfinished but everyone got the idea.

“I’ll buy a pear and deliver it to your school every day for a week.” Inukai promised, bowing his head respectfully, “Thank you for your great sacrifice, Hatohara-chan.”

“N-No, you don’t have to.” Hatohara waved her hands frantically.

“Please let me.” Inukai insisted, sending her an unwavering look.

“I’ll pick the best pears for Hatohara-senpai.” Hiyami piped in.

“I can be the delivery man.” Tsuji supplied.

“Wait, then what do I do?” Inukai questioned, opening a palm.

Hiyami and Tsuji shared a look for half a second before speaking in unison: “Thank you for sponsoring, Inukai-senpai.”

“Eh?” Inukai blurted out cluelessly. Then it dawned on him. “No, wait. If we’re in this together, you two should contribute some money too.”

“We do the labor so it’s only fair that Inukai-senpai covers the cost, isn’t it?” Hiyami pointed out.

Inukai puffed his cheeks, “Then I can be the delivery man and Tsuji-chan can sponsor-”

“It’s not right to ask your kouhai to pay, Inukai-kun.” Hatohara interrupted, then hastily turned away when Inukai whipped his head towards her in surprise, probably not expecting her to jump in the conversation at such a critical moment.

“You three gang up on me. That’s not fair.” Inukai crossed his arms, pouting.

While Hatohara and Hiyami were covering their mouths to muffle their giggles, Tsuji sighed. “I’ll take Inukai-senpai to the new hotdog stall near my house after our plan succeeds. Is it okay?” he offered.

The pair of teal eyes lit up instantly like a kid receiving a candy. “Really?” Inukai asked, not hiding his excitement one bit.

“Really.” Tsuji confirmed with an exasperated smile, “But I’ll only treat you once-”

However, Inukai didn’t seem to mind the last part because he had already clapped his hands happily and yelled: “Tsuji-chan is the best!”

After the commotion died down, they returned to the plan for tomorrow. While Hatohara and Hiyami were engrossed in a discussion on the decoration, Inukai leaned towards Tsuji, whispering, “This is the first time Tsuji-chan asks me out for a date. I’m looking forward to it.”

“It’s not a date.” Tsuji deadpanned, bored of repeating himself too many times on this matter.

Inukai responded with a broad smile. “It isn’t a date, but I’m looking forward to it nevertheless,” he said.

...

The plan played out perfectly as everyone expected until Hatohara sent the planned text. After a few minutes, Hatohara’s phone rang and she picked up, bracing herself for a full lecture. Yet...

“N-No, I didn’t hurt myself or anything.” Hatohara answered, clearly taken aback by something. “I’m really fine, don’t worry. Nothing went wrong- No, I mean, your document isn’t okay but nothing else is damaged.” Then there was a few seconds of silence. “No, I’m not lying, Ninomiya-san.” Hatohara struggled, “I really spilled water onto your document so please come- What? Just throw them away and print out another copy? The file is on the computer? But I don’t know which file- You will tell me which one?”

No matter how Tsuji looked at it, this was clearly a losing battle. They had underestimated Ninomiya’s composure. If some document got wet, they just had to print out another one. There was nothing emergency about it, which meant the captain wouldn’t need to come here personally... Why hadn’t any of them considered it? Were they stupid or what?

No, what they had expected wasn’t Ninomiya coming here to solve the problem but him arriving here to reprimand the careless person. Yet the captain wasn’t mad even for a second.

Then it hit Tsuji.

What had Hatohara said during the discussion again?

“I’m... used to being scolded by Ninomiya-san so...”

Yes, that was probably the reason. Ninomiya had scolded Hatohara too often that he didn't feel the need to admonish her about trivial matters such as staining some document.

“Hatohara-senpai! Your finger!” Hiyami suddenly screamed, pulling Tsuji off his train of thoughts and startling Hatohara – who kept answering ‘Yes, I understand’ on the phone.

“My finger?” Hatohara asked confusedly, looking at her hand.

Not waiting for Hatohara to get the idea, Hiyami snatched her phone, keeping it at a reasonable distance before continuing her panicked voice, “Did you cut your finger earlier? That’s why I told you to let me tidy it up. Tsuji-kun, can you bandage Hatohara-senpai’s wound? I’ll talk with Ninomiya-san.”

“S-sure,” Tsuji answered in reflex, still not following the Operator.

Then Hiyami took the phone, “Sorry, Ninomiya-san. I will- Ah, he hung up.” Returning the phone to Hatohara, she clapped her hands, “Get in your positions. Ninomiya-san will come here within ten minutes.”

“How do you know?” Hatohara finally managed some words, still disoriented.

“Trust me, senpai.” Hiyami smiled, then turned to Tsuji, who was still staring at her in bafflement, “Tsuji-kun, can you get the party poppers for us?”

Having the same confusion as Hatohara but Tsuji delayed the question and went to fetch the necessary items. When he came back, Hatohara and Hiyami were already in their position beside the main door so he joined them.

After about seven minutes, the door slid open.

“Hatohara-”

The poppers went off, followed by a startled “Ah!” from the voice that Tsuji – and probably everyone else – would never expect to hear.

“Happy birthday, Ninomiya-san!” Hiyami, Hatohara and Tsuji cheered in unison – the result of their practice for a month long.

“Happy birthday... Ninomiya-san.” Inukai followed quietly a few moments later from behind Ninomiya’s back.

Then after that was a deafening silence.

At the doorway, Ninomiya stood frozen like a statue, not even making any movement to remove the colorful papers from his hair or his clothes. His beige eyes, void of any emotions, stared straight ahead at the three subordinates who had just fired the confetti at him.

With all his will, Tsuji moved his gaze from the captain to the person poking his head out from Ninomiya’s side. Inukai gave him a strained smile and made a praying gesture with his hands.

Uh oh.

This seemed bad.

No, worse.

And it truly turned into a full-fledged lecture right at the table where the party food were arranged, while they were surrounded by cute decorations.

The only time Tsuji dared to lift his head was when Ninomiya went to grab a drink, and the little paper snowman on one of the streamers smiled at him like it was totally unaware of the *tragedy* befalling the people who had created it.

“Don’t surprise me like this ever again.” Ninomiya concluded after his one-hour lecture.

“Yes, sir.” The four subordinates replied quietly with their heads hung low.

“Okay, you’re dismissed.” Ninomiya waved his hand dismissively.

“Eh?” Inukai blurted out.

Ninomiya raised an eyebrow at the dark-blond-haired subordinate. “You have a question?” he asked.

Inukai dodged his look and gestured at the table with his eyes, “We still have unfinished business.”

A silent ‘ah’ found its way out of Ninomiya’s lips as he followed Inukai’s eyes. However, he didn’t say anything else.

So Inukai spoke for him, and the others, “Let’s celebrate your eighteenth birthday, Ninomiya-san.”

Tsuji quickly joined his senpai. “Happy birthday, Ninomiya-san.” he said with a small smile.

“Happy birthday.” Hiyami caught up with the boys, “Thank you for choosing and leading us.”

“Thank you for coming here too...” Hatohara added sheepishly, “I’m sorry for making you worry-”

“We’ve gone through that already.” Ninomiya interrupted her, “Don’t bring it up again.”

“Understood.” said Hatohara with her back straightened.

“No, I mean-” Ninomiya halted, clearing his throat awkwardly as he averted his eyes to the side, “Just start eating. Food is getting cold.”

However, instead of agreeing, Hatohara moved her gaze to Inukai, asking for help.

“We can’t eat yet, Ninomiya-san.” Inukai said with a smile saying ‘*What do I do with you?*’. The captain gave him a questioning look. “Not until you make a wish.” he finished, gesturing with his hand at the white birthday cake where the candles were secretly lit up by Tsuji a few moments earlier.

“I wish all of you will continue to follow me and achieve the A-rank’s first place by next year.” Ninomiya said instantly, not even a moment of hesitation, and blew out the candles. “I’m done. You all can start eating now.”

There was a moment of silence, then Tsuji looked at Hiyami across the table before moving his gaze to Inukai, who was still blinking his eyes as if he didn’t believe what had just transpired.

And then, Inukai opened his mouth, “Uhm... Ninomiya-san?” The captain frowned slightly but gestured for him to continue. “You aren’t supposed to say your wish out loud.” he said troublingly.

“What’s wrong with doing so?” Ninomiya lifted an eyebrow.

“Your wish might not come true...” Tsuji explained reluctantly, folding his hands.

Ninomiya chuckled.

And the four subordinates froze.

They didn’t even need to look at each other to know the same thought that was running through each other’s head. *Yes*. Because their captain had just *chuckled*. It was what people did when they found something amusing. But the Ninomiya who didn’t even find achieving the first place in B-rank amusing had just chuckled because of... Tsuji’s *explanation*?

Had he just said something *fundamentally wrong*? Tsuji wondered. Or had it been *too childish*?

“Did I say something wrong...?” Tsuji whispered bewilderedly.

Thankfully, Ninomiya didn’t let him wait for long. “So you’re saying some of you might leave me?” the captain asked.

“No way.” Tsuji was the first to speak up, surprising even himself, “I won’t leave unless Ninomiya-san fires me.”

“Me neither.” was Hiyami’s answer.

Hatohara shook her head frantically without saying anything.

Inukai remained silent for a few seconds and scratched his cheek. “I was the one asking Ninomiya-san to join the squad so there’s no way I’ll leave on my own.” he smiled wryly, “That’s a weird question.”

“So it doesn’t matter if I say my wish out loud, does it?” Ninomiya said confidently, “Together, we will achieve the first place in A-rank by next year without fail.”

“Yes, sir!” all four of them responded at the same time.

Somewhere at the end of the party, when the girls were busy washing dishes and the boys were removing the decorations – Ninomiya wanted to help but the four subordinates insisted him to go home because this was his birthday, a thought emerged in Tsuji’s head and he couldn’t find a satisfying answer so he asked: “Inukai-senpai, why did you want to join Ninomiya-san’s squad?”

Inukai seemed confused, “Why do you ask?”

“It’s fine if you don’t want to answer.” Tsuji hastily said, realizing that he was prying.

Since Inukai didn’t say anything, they returned to their work. However, it didn’t take long for Inukai to stop his hand in front of a dinosaur sticker. “Hey Tsuji-chan,” he called.

Tsuji turned to the older teammate and met the familiar gentle smile.

“If I said that I joined this squad for Tsuji-chan, would you accept my confession?”

Inhaling sharply, Tsuji suddenly couldn’t find his words. The pair of teal eyes as clear and deep as the pond in a forest gazed at him lovingly like they were trying to convey something yet he was incapable of grasping it. Therefore, Tsuji kept opening and closing his mouth without making a sound.

After almost a minute, the answer finally found its way to the tip of Tsuji's tongue. However, before he could say it, Inukai put a finger on his lips.

"The answer is no, isn't it?" Inukai asked with a smile. Tsuji nodded his head ever so slowly as if afraid of breaking eye-contact. "Then don't make that face or I may think that Tsuji-chan also likes me."

Tsuji jolted backwards and immediately touched his face but was obviously unable to figure out what expression he was having.

In front of him, Inukai giggled amusedly. "I'm just joking," the older teammate teased, "Tsuji-chan is so cute when flustered like that."

Ignoring Inukai, Tsuji turned back to the wall and forcefully pulled off a puppy sticker as if it had personally offended him.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading <3.

I didn't expect this one to be this long tbh. However, I enjoyed every moment while writing this so I hope you feel the same XD.

I actually finished this a week ago but I decided to wait till my birthday to post because I probably can't finish anything else in a week due to my work qwq. The updates may take a long time but I'm still writing so hope you will stay with me qwq.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!